The CURATOR

RÉHAHN

Special Edition

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From The Sky, 2017, Hoi An

ÉDITO

One morning in the early fall of 2022, I received a text from Réhahn. I was in the car driving back from a weekend spent observing la vendange in Champagne, France - the intense period in late summer/early autumn when farmers harvest their precious grapes to turn them into champagne. Réhahn, for his part, was nearly 10,000 kilometers away, returning from the rice fields in Hoi An, Vietnam, where he'd spent two days photographing farmers burning their fields after the harvest so that they could use the ash to nourish their peanut gardens. The symmetry suited me.

Over the nearly five years I'd known Réhahn, I'd grown accustomed to opening my phone and receiving an "art gallery" in my inbox: unedited shots from his travels, behind-the-scenes videos of his visits with the ethnic groups in Vietnam, and gallery ready images that seemed to jump off the screen with their vibrant colors and subjects. These images and their accompanying texts about art and philosophies were also my companions during the pandemic- a lifeline back to Vietnam, a country I dearly loved, and a connection to what was beautiful in the world despite the anxiety and sadness infecting everyone at that time. From 2020 to 2022, I witnessed Réhahn's artistic transformation from formal portraits for his Precious Heritage Project to his deep investigation (and artistic abstractions) of artisanal traditions to his increased fascination with breaking open the possibilities of color and texture in photography. This exploration led him on an odyssey of sorts. A journey through books into the wheat fields of Arles, France to unravel the exact colors Van Gogh used in his paintings, another excursion into the mind of Monet to understand why painting hundreds of pictures of waterlilies was an act of revolution - a rebellion against the standards of the time. He began experimenting, first with reflections and eventually with heat, to bend the rules of what was imaginable in photography.

Then came that text. An image of a woman in a field: amber, gold, and burnt sienna tones smudged like painted layers of light and shadow. It was as richly textured as an oil painting, luminous … and unlike anything I'd ever seen. He'd broken open the boundaries between photography and painting, 21st-century life and 19th-century Impressionism. He called the photo *"Flame."* The idea of this flame took form in my mind. Fire is used to rejuvenate the earth, contributing to an endless cycle of birth and death and birth again. Proof that, in fact, nothing ever truly disappears. Not ash, nor inspiration. They constantly circle back to give life to something new. This concept of cycles is part of what makes Réhahn's work so layered. He considers each series from many points of view: artistic, historical, anthropological, personal. His infinite desire to shift our perceptions about what the world and its people look like, is what inspired this magazine. The conversations and analyses on the following pages attempt to dig into those layers, to give context to the works so that viewers can have keys to unlock the vision behind them. Yet, when it comes down to it, all that matters is their impact. If a piece of art can make you catch your breath, even from the small format of a smart phone screen, then perhaps it doesn't need a frame of reference. It can become like that flame, burning on in imperceptible ways, illuminating new ideas again and again.

Editor - Molly Headley

TIMELINE OF IMPORTANT MOVEMENTS IN ART 1780 - PRESENT

Romanticism

1780-1850

Romanticism, emphasizing emotion, imagination, and a connection with nature, emerged as a response to the rationality of the Enlightenment, fostering a deep appreciation for individual expression, the sublime, and the exotic.

Realism

1848-1900

Realism, in contrast to Romantic idealism, depicted everyday life with a focus on accurate representation, addressing social issues and offering a truthful portrayal of the human experience.

Impressionism

1865-1886

Impressionism, characterized by its emphasis on capturing the fleeting effects of light and color through loose brushwork, sought to convey the artist's immediate perception of a scene.

- The eighth and final Impressionist exhibition took place in Paris in 1886; however, the ongoing effects from the Impressionist movement continued for many years after this expo.
- Monet's famous Waterlily series was completed between 1890 and his death in 1926.

See Conversations About Impressionism on page 50 to learn more.

Post-Impressionism

1885-1910

Post-Impressionism encompassed diverse styles such as the expressive color of Van Gogh, the pointillism of Seurat, and the introspective symbolism of Gauguin, emphasizing individual expression and a departure from strict representation.

Fauvism

1900-1935

Fauvism, led by artists like Matisse and Derain, was characterized by bold, vibrant colors, distorted forms, and a departure from realistic representation, emphasizing emotional expression and a sense of spontaneity in its approach to color and brushwork.

Expressionism

1905-1920

Expressionism sought to convey heightened emotional and subjective states through distorted and exaggerated forms, vivid colors, and a rejection of objective reality, reflecting the artists' inner feelings and responses to the world.

Cubism

1907-1914

Cubism, pioneered by Picasso and Braque, revolutionized art by breaking down subjects into geometric shapes and multiple perspectives, challenging traditional notions of representation and space.

Surrealism

1917-1950

Surrealism, influenced by Freudian psychology, explored the irrational and subconscious through dreamlike imagery, juxtaposing unrelated elements to evoke a sense of mystery and surprise.

Abstract Expressionism

1940-1960

Abstract Expressionism, marked by artists like Pollock and Rothko, emphasized spontaneous, gestural expression and emotional intensity, often eschewing representational forms in favor of non-representational abstraction.

Minimalism

1960s-Present

Minimalism sought simplicity and purity in form, often reducing artworks to basic geometric shapes, monochromatic color schemes, and a focus on the inherent qualities of materials.

Contemporary Art

1970s-present

Contemporary Art encompasses a diverse range of styles, mediums, and conceptual approaches, reflecting the globalized and interconnected nature of the art world, with artists exploring themes ranging from identity and technology to social and political issues.

TIMELINE OF IMPORTANT EVENTS IN RÉHAHN'S CAREER

THE PORTRAIT PERIOD

2011 - 2016

Destination and Travel portraits

Hidden Smile

Ageless Beauty

THE PRECIOUS HERITAGE PERIOD

2010 - 2020

2011

- "Rosalia," a portrait of a little Peruvian girl in Cuzco, won the 2011 Los Angeles Times annual photo contest.
- Réhahn captured his portrait of Madame Xong, which would eventually become the artist's most iconic portrait. "Hidden Smile" would be featured in more than 500 articles and television programs around the world.
- The photographer started his research for The Precious Heritage Project, which would become his pinnacle project for the following decade.
- French travel TV program Échappées Belles (France 5), featured Réhahn in a documentary about his work with the ethnic groups in Vietnam on June 15, 2016

2014

- In December 2014, Réhahn was ranked fourth of the top 10 best travel photographers in the world, along with Steve McCurry, by the website boredpanda.com. This article was translated into more than 20 languages.
- Réhahn's first book "Vietnam, Mosaic of Contrasts (Volume I)" was published in January 2014. It received international acclaim and became a bestseller worldwide.

2015

Réhahn's second Fine Art coffee table book was published in November 2015. "Vietnam, Mosaic of Contrasts - Volume II" became the newest bestselling edition in the photographer's coffee table book series.

SCENES OF LIFE

2015 - 2020

2016

- Réhahn's portrait of Madame Xong was chosen to officially enter the permanent collection of the Vietnamese Women's Museum in Hanoi.
- In January 2016, the artist was ranked the second most popular French photographer on the internet by French website lense.fr.

2017

- Réhahn opened the PRECIOUS HERITAGE museum in Hoi An, Vietnam. It showcases the information, portraits, traditional costumes and artifacts of all 54 officially recognized ethnic groups in Vietnam, in addition to numerous subgroups. The museum is free to the public.
- Réhahn opened his first Fine Art Photography gallery in Saigon
- The Museum of Ethnology in Hanoi presented a curated exhibition of the Precious Heritage collection.

2018

- In March 2018, the artist was honored during an official ceremony to commemorate 45 years of diplomatic relations between France and Vietnam when Vietnam's Secretary of the Party, Nguyen Phu Trong, who became President of Vietnam, presented French President Emmanuel Macron with a limited edition copy of the portrait "Hidden Smile".
- The same month, Réhahn was awarded the 2018 Trophy for French Nationals Abroad by the French information website lepetitjournal.com.

WORK POST
PRECIOUS HERITAGE
2020 - 2021
Photographing Vietnam's Artisans

2019

- The Precious Heritage Museum was listed as a must-visit location in Hoi An in The New York Times article: "36 Hours in Hoi An."
- "100 Iconic Portraits" was published in November featuring 100 of the artist's most well-known portraits from both his travel and Precious Heritage collections.

2020

- "Vietnam, Mosaic of Contrasts Volume III" was published in February 2020. It showcases more than a decade of the artist's work in Vietnam, including his bestselling Fine Art photos as well as a deeper exploration of the craftsmanship, traditional skills and lifestyles that fill the countryside.
- Réhahn made history by selling his iconic portrait "Hidden Smile" for $150,000 USD – making it the most expensive photograph ever sold in Asia.
- The artist officially completed The Precious Heritage Project after meeting the final 54th ethnic group.

2021

- Réhahn's work was featured in an article for The New York Times about traditional fishing in Vietnam during the pandemic - A Year Without Travel.
- Fifteen of Réhahn's most iconic photographs were displayed on the exterior wall of the French Consulate General of Ho Chi Minh City.

2022

Johnnie Walker Whisky collaborated with Réhahn on a Limited Edition series. The edition features five of Réhahn's bestselling photos on luxury Blue Label whisky art bottles, with an edition of only 100 per photo set.

2023

- The French luxury marquetry company Elie Bleu created the Elva collection for cigar connoisseurs with a custom limited edition humidor, lighter and ashtray.
- The Precious Heritage Museum became the first museum in Vietnam to be featured on Google Arts & Culture with a full online exhibit.
- Réhahn opened his flagship gallery on the iconic Dong Khoi street in downtown Ho Chi Minh City featuring his groundbreaking "Memories of Impressionism" exhibition.

WORK POST PRECIOUS HERITAGE
2022 to Current Day
Impressionism And Post-impressionism

CONVERSATION
ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHY

"Photography is a marvelous discovery, a science that has attracted the greatest intellect, an art that excites the most astute minds – and one that can be practiced by any imbecile.Photographic theory can be taught in an hour, the basic technique in a day. But what cannot be taught is the feeling for light. It is how light lies on the face that you as an artist must capture. Nor can one be taught how to grasp the personality of the sitter. To produce an intimate likeness rather than a banal portrait - the result of mere chance - you mus put yourself at once in communion with the sitter, size up his thoughts and his very character."

-Nadar, 1856, Paris

168 *years after Nadar first wrote this text, the debate between photography and artistry is still going strong. The relative ease of taking a photo—especially, with modern-day smartphone cameras, which don't require any special equipment or knowledge—has created a psychological shift in the value of photographs. Even family albums—once considered the items that one might rush into a burning building to save—have become piles of digital ephemera in the cloud. As quickly taken as forgotten.*

Other art forms, such as painting and sculpture, have not undergone the same mass pedestrian utilization and diffusion on social media. As a result, they've managed to remain relatively unscathed in the debate about what constitutes art and, more importantly, what makes an artist. Notable exceptions, such as Marcel Duchamp's famous toilet art installation, sparked conversations about what is gallery-worthy. Yet, the difference lies in the angle. Critics focused more on the validity of the work itself rather than on whether Duchamp had the "spirit of an artist."

When it comes to photography, the division is much harder to quantify. When do travel photos become works of art, rather than photographic accounts of our lives? Does the difference lie in the equipment that's used (professional cameras vs. smartphones) or is it in the intention behind the work? The photographer Ansel Adams once said, "You don't take a photograph, you make it." This implies the idea that an artist transforms a scene with his or her will, rather than simply taking it as one might take a box of cereal at a supermarket. For an artist, a photo is inherently an act of creation - a concept Réhahn often reiterates in our conversations.

George Sand by Nadar, 1864

"Everyone is photographer, not everyone is an artist."

The art of photography has fascinated minds for centuries, with Nadar expressing the importance of capturing the feeling of light and the sitter's personality over technical details. How do you approach these aspects in your own work?

Nadar's words resonate with me. Photography involves more than just technique; it's about understanding and connecting with the subject, whether the subject is a person, a burning field, or a building. To capture something deeper, one must try to get to the essence of both the subject/scene and the reason for taking the photo. Who is the person in the portrait, and why do they matter to you? What is the color or angle or idea that will make this work different from others? These are all questions that are constantly swirling in my mind during my artistic process. For me, that process goes beyond creating a technically pretty picture because of good lighting and editing.

Your perspective on awards, competitions, and brand ambassadorship is unique. How do you navigate the balance between artistic expression and the demands of the digital age?

My spam folder is filled with notifications about competitions or awards. But I don't open them because I don't believe awards and competitions should define my work. I've been asked to be on the juries of certain competitions, but for me, it's about capturing a unique emotion that transcends the visual replica.

One thing I hate is the idea that rules define one's skill and these types of competitions are often judged by seeing how well the photos follow certain rules. This ideology goes against the artist's mindset. For example, people often speak about the "Rule of Thirds" (which is a way to split the image into three sections of interest) as a necessary part of making a good composition. However, I break this rule all the time. I only use it on occasion if it works for my concept. Otherwise, I toss it out, along with many other rules that define "good photography."

I believe photography is more than a technical skill. There's a distinction between technicians and artists. It's about capturing emotion and understanding the subject, not just replicating a scene. Everyone is a photographer, not everyone is an artist. (laughs) Can you imagine Picasso and Monet competing to discover who is the painter of the year so that they can post that on social media?

Black Ha Nhi Ethnic Group, 2017

So for example, someone who goes to copy your photo of Madame Xong - *"Hidden Smile"* - can't explain why she is covering her face with two hands. But, the artist can?

Yes, they can meet her, ask her to put her hands up - and believe me, people have tried to do just that - but they wouldn't be able to get the same emotion because it isn't authentic. For a photographer who isn't an artist, the image looks the same. But for viewers, it's not.

I would even go so far as to say that I can't remake the same photograph twice, even if I try to replicate the exact moment, place, scenario etc. It comes down to the emotion at the moment.

I believe an artist has to put his experience, his knowledge, his philosophy into his art. My photo *"The Neighbors"* is an example. I would never have taken this photo, with this exact composition, if I'd not been in the process of reading a book about Edward Hopper. I probably would have missed this shot. But my research and experiences give me new reflexes and ways to look at my work. Since I started to work on Impressionism, I see things that I use to miss, like reflections.

You've mentioned a reluctance to be too exposed, drawing parallels with artists like Cezanne and Degas. You've refused to be a brand ambassador for a major camera brand and keep your personal life completely out of the public eye. How does this preference for privacy influence your creative process?

I find solace in privacy. Much like artists who distanced themselves from public exposure, I spend a significant amount of time reading and reflecting. I'm not seeking fame; I'm seeking to create meaningful art.

Monet and Renoir, for example, left Paris quickly after their last Impressionist exhibition in 1886 because they wanted to get back to their work and not have to answer questions from critics. Monet remained in his garden most of the time so that he could paint in peace. Picasso never attended an opening of his exhibition. Neither did Cezanne. Degas said: *"Je voudrais être illustre et inconnu."* I want to be illustrious and unknown.

I love this idea of the work remaining without it having to be attached to me as a person. Exposure in an era of constant judgment on social media doesn't align with my creative pursuits.

Hidden Smile, 2011, Hoi An

What other creative pursuits would you explore if you had the time?

If I could paint, I would. (laughs) I'm a frustrated painter.

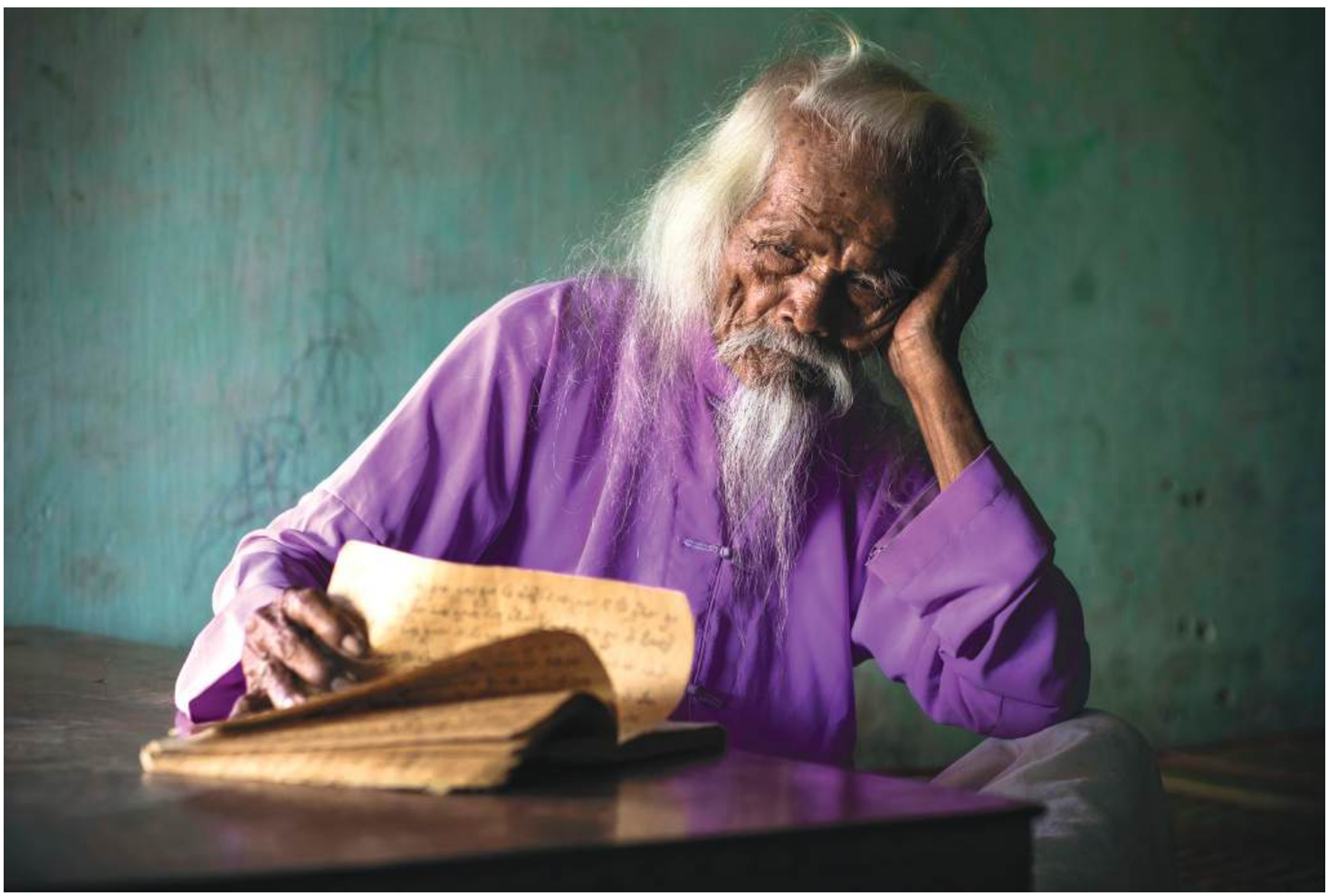
What advice would you give to a young photographer?

I would tell them to read the biographies of the greatest artists who've ever lived. Learn how to think as an artist by understanding their stories. So many artists, whose names are iconic now, were completely misunderstood by the critics and even their own audiences.

I meet many young photographers who spend their time on forums debating about whether Nikon is best, or Canon, and whether one should do staged photography or candid pictures. I think this is beside the point. It stifles creativity to imagine that we only have one choice … one style. When you spend too much time on forums, you'll be influenced by other people to follow their style because people always want to say that their way is right. Real artists should be allowed to express what they want, regardless of what others think. In the same way that Gaugin painted trees in tones of blue and purple, a photographer doesn't have to please others by adhering to certain rules and reality.

Look at the Impressionists, the critics hated them!

Art is subjective. Something that touches one person, might leave someone else indifferent. This is why the act of criticizing art is so complicated. Bucking trends and being authentic to yourself and your vision is the only way to truly love what you do and to find your voice as an artist.



The Thinker, 2019, Phan Rang

Ba Sau, 2017, Hoi An

CONVERSATION
ABOUT HIDDEN SMILES

Réhahn's Hidden Smile project enters into the realm of visual anthropology. Born from a serendipitous chance encounter in Hoi An in 2011, Hidden Smile unravels the complexities of Vietnamese culture through the subtle language of obscured smiles.

The project is multifaceted, exploring the profound cultural nuances that define the enigmatic smiles of Vietnam. From the tradition of blackened teeth to the indigo-stained hands of artisans, each facet of the project invites us to contemplate the narratives etched within the contours of each expression.

Hoi An, Viet Nam

Réhahn, could you share with us the story behind the inception of the *"Hidden Smile"* project?

The project began in 2011 when I met the woman whom I affectionately call Madame Xong - Mrs. Bui Thi Xong in Hoi An. When I took her portrait, she casually covered her smile with her hands marking the beginning of the *"Hidden Smile"* project.

Why is covering the mouth a common action in Vietnam, and how does it contribute to the complexity of the hidden smiles?

In Vietnam, covering the mouth is a common gesture tied to various emotions—modesty, politeness, discomfort, or joy. This adds complexity to the smiles I capture, revealing a diverse range of emotions that may be challenging to articulate fully. It's a cultural nuance that fascinated me and became a central theme in the project.

Blackening teeth in Vietnam is an old tradition that certain ethnic groups still partake in. Can you share more about this tradition and its significance?

Madame Xong & Réhahn, Hoi An

"In Vietnam, smiles are not just expressions of joy; they carry hidden meanings. They also reflect the country's optimistic spirit. In contrast to the negativity prevalent in modern society, the beaming faces in Vietnam create an aura of optimism, showcasing the power of smiles as a universal language that opens doors and bridges gaps."

This tradition dates back to before the 7th century when it was believed that only devils and wild animals had long white teeth. Adolescent females were taught to blacken their teeth to avoid being mistaken for evil spirits. The painful beauty ritual became deeply ingrained, and the betel nut played a crucial role in the process, eventually becoming part of Vietnam's cultural identity.

How does the *"Hidden Smile"* project incorporate cultural elements like indigo dye and other artisanal traditions in Vietnam's ethnic groups?

The project extends beyond facial expressions to include the hands of artisans stained with indigo dye, a significant cultural element in Vietnam's ethnic groups. My hope is that the vibrant blue hands add another layer of curiosity, prompting viewers to explore the rich cultures of these communities.

Can you elaborate on the impact of smiles in Vietnamese culture, particularly in contrast to the prevalence of negativity in modern society?

In Vietnam, smiles are not just expressions of joy; they carry hidden meanings. They also reflect the country's optimistic spirit. In contrast to the negativity prevalent in modern society, the beaming faces in Vietnam create an aura of optimism, showcasing the power of smiles as a universal language that opens doors and bridges gaps.

What message do you hope viewers will take away from the *"Hidden Smile"* project?

I hope viewers make their own conclusions about the stories behind the covered smiles. I want them to realize that there's a deeper narrative waiting to be discovered—a story that goes beyond the surface.

CONVERSATION
ABOUT AGELESS BEAUTY

103 years old, 2013, Hai An

The art world has always challenged conventional notions of beauty. Consider the vast differences between Botticelli's Venus and Picasso's Marie-Thérèse in "Le Reve" or the raw but strangely beautiful self-portraits of Egon Schiele, Vincent van Gogh, Lucian Freud, and Frida Kahlo. Even the Mona Lisa, arguably the world's most admired painting, has spent centuries subjected to debates about whether or not she's beautiful or even whether the painting merits its fame. We all know that beauty is subjective, yet, this is especially true in the world of art where beauty and emotion intersect.

The Russian author Leo Tolstoy wrote that "The activity of art is based on the capacity of people to infect others with their own emotions and to be infected by the emotions of others. Strong emotions, weak emotions, important emotions or irrelevant emotions, good emotions or bad emotions – if they contaminate the reader, the spectator, or the listener – it attains the function of art."

Réhahn has a similar philosophy when he speaks about his well-known "Ageless Beauty" project. He writes, "To me, ageless beauty means beauty that is timeless. Rather than constantly striving to appear young, there is meaning in celebrating humankind in all its forms, ages and stages. In my opinion, the only thing that remains beautiful is something that can touch one's heart."

Yet, in reality, modern society's idea of conventional beauty has little to do with emotion and everything to do with youth. The advent of social media has brought this obsession with the unachievable goal of eternal youth even more to the forefront of our aesthetic principles. Réhahn's "Ageless Beauty" portraits aim to contradict this concept through poignant portraits of subjects who are in the winter years of their lives, from the ages of 75 to 100+. Each portrait is a celebration of wrinkles, gray hair and experience. In this conversation, the artist discusses his inspiration behind these portraits.

Lady in the mirror, 2017, Hoi An

> *"The elderly, often undervalued in our youth-centric culture, are the custodians of heritage."*

Your "Ageless Beauty" project captures the essence of aging with remarkable grace. Could you share the inspiration behind delving into the lives of the elderly in Vietnam?

My fascination with the elderly stems from their untold stories, their resilience in the face of time's passage. As I traveled through Vietnam, I discovered a wealth of narratives etched on the faces of those who had witnessed history unfold. Their hands, weathered by years of work, tell tales of joy, sorrow, and a lifetime of experiences. Ageless beauty, to me, transcends the superficial pursuit of eternal youth. It lies in the authenticity of lived experiences, in the lines that map the journey of one's life. If we were to erase these marks of time, what profound aspects of existence would be lost?

Your work prompts a reflection on societal values, particularly the undue emphasis on youth and beauty. How does the elderly population contribute to preserving heritage, despite societal tendencies to overlook them?

The elderly, often undervalued in our youth-centric culture, are the custodians of heritage. They carry forward traditions, embodying the collective wisdom of generations. Despite societal pressures to conform to a narrow definition of beauty, their significance lies in the preservation of cultural legacies and resilience in the face of difficulty. Vietnam, with its centenarians and individuals who have witnessed monumental historical shifts, encapsulates the essence of ageless beauty. During my Precious Heritage project, I often visited villages where people were still relevant and valued members of their communities in their 90s and beyond. Most of my cherished companions in Vietnam are at least twice my age, yet, I feel at home with them. I find my elderly friends to be utterly beautiful, both in spirit and in their portraits.

Is there one particular portrait that defines this philosophy for you?

I am often drawn to the portrait *"Lady in the Mirror"* because of what it represents. As you know, I love to read, and one of my all-time favorite books is "The Picture of Dorian Gray" by Oscar Wilde. In my photo, the woman looking in the mirror is the opposite of Dorian. She appears to be young from behind, but the mirror reveals her true age. I love her expression as she looks in the mirror, and I take her smile as a celebration, rather than turning away from her age, she embraces it.

What do you want people to take away from this series?

I simply hope, in looking at the faces in these portraits, that viewers will reconsider the conventional benchmarks of beauty and appreciate the profound beauty that transcends age. On a personal note, as I turned 40, this series helped me become more comfortable with my own aging process. I began this series in 2011, more than a decade ago. But I've noticed that slowly popular culture seems to be trying to rethink beauty as well. The recent cover of Vogue in the Philippines featuring the portrait of the lovely 106-year-old Maria Oggay gives me hope that standards are finally shifting … but it will likely be a long process.

CONVERSATION
ABOUT THE PRECIOUS HERITAGE PROJECT

When Réhahn embarked on a mission to document Vietnam's rich cultural tapestry through intimate and dignified portraits of its 54+ ethnic groups, his philosophical underpinnings shaping his interactions with subjects and informed his choices in lighting and style. The project, which took more than a decade to complete and became the artist's most well-known body of work to date, was rooted in an insatiable need to dig beyond what was already considered standard knowledge through academic and in-person research with the goal of telling the deeper story. The result is a body of work—displayed in The Precious Heritage Museum in Hoi An—that weaves a narrative that transcends time, bridging the gap between past and present, and celebrating the resilient beauty of Vietnam's diverse ethnic communities.

The Precious Heritage Museum, Hoi An

The Dao, 2015, Sapa

The Precious Heritage Project evolved into a massive undertaking, transitioning from a personal project to a mission that involved meeting, photographing, and documenting all 54 ethnic groups? Can you share more about how this evolution unfolded, and what role the tribal leaders played in entrusting you with their cultural artifacts?

The project began as a way to connect with the people and cultures of Vietnam. The more I traveled, the deeper my desire to learn grew. Tribal leaders, seeing my dedication, began entrusting me with examples of their traditional crafts and costumes. It soon became clear that I needed a dedicated space to present these portraits and artifacts—the idea for the Precious Heritage Museum was born. In 2017, the museum opened in Hoi An, showcasing over 200 photographs and 62 traditional wardrobe ensembles spanning 5 rooms and 500 sqm. The museum is free to the public, as a way to honor the living history of the tribes.

The resilience of the Vietnamese people is remarkable, adapting to changing times. However, it comes with challenges, especially for the younger generations leaving their villages. How has this reality impacted the ethnic groups and their cultural heritage?

Adapting has had an impact. Many young adults seek a better future in cities, leaving behind their rich cultural heritage. The urgency to retain this heritage is palpable among the elders. It's a race against time to preserve languages, music, and crafting techniques unique to each tribe. For example, the Brau, with only 397 left, are struggling to maintain their customs like teeth filing and ear stretching. The O Du, the smallest ethnic group, face the imminent loss of their language within five years. The Chut, the final tribe I documented, have a unique history, having been moved from a cave to a restricted area in 1959, and as a result much of the information about their former ways of life were lost.

Your encounters with these communities must have been profound, especially the connection you established with the elders.

Absolutely. These interactions truly changed the way I saw the world. In each community, I make an effort to seek out the elders, recognizing that they are the keepers of their culture. When they speak of their traditions or don their traditional dress, you can see a profound sense of pride and joy in their eyes. This makes the time that I spent completing this project worth it to me.

A Dip, 2017, Kon Tum

Speaking of these interactions, you've mentioned your admiration for the 19th-century portrait photographer, Nadar, who was known for his emphasis on forming relationships with his subjects. Do you approach your interactions in a similar way?

Interaction is at the core of my approach. I'm not merely interested in snapping photos; I want to delve into the story behind the person. Who they are, what they want to convey, and how I can help them express it with respect are questions I ask myself before every portrait. This approach was crucial for this work, where each portrait represented both the individual and their ethnic group's diverse cultural heritage. I aimed to create a bridge between the viewer and the subject, fostering curiosity and respect for their culture.

How has Nadar's style influenced your stylistic approach to capturing the portraits for the Precious Heritage Project?

I was always drawn to classic French literature, particularly authors like Victor Hugo, George Sand, Charles Baudelaire, and Alexandre Dumas. Interestingly, they were all photographed by Nadar. His work was intimate and elegant, capturing the essence of his subjects with simplicity. This philosophy resonated deeply with me. He believed in connecting with the subject, understanding their thoughts and character to produce an intimate likeness. He used natural light to avoid any "falsification" of the subject's features and often shot them in front of a plain dark background.

You mentioned natural light being a crucial element in your portrait photography. How do you believe it contributes to creating the desired contrast and capturing the authentic expressions of your subjects?

I think it goes a long way in creating a more intimate space between the photographer and the person in front of the camera. It also helps me create contrast, softening the effect and allowing subjects to express themselves instinctively in their natural environment. Knowing how light varies at different times of the day and in various locations is crucial. Waiting for the right light, even for hours, becomes essential to highlight the unique features and age marks on a subject's face. Each portrait is a story told in a single moment, where lighting, colors, and interaction with the subject influence its success in communicating with the viewer.

What was your research process during this project? Did it differ from other projects?

Yes. The research for Precious Heritage was done in multiple stages. First, I researched each tribe by getting as much information about them as I could - their location, size of the population, language roots, traditions etc. As part of my book collection, I have more than

The Brau, 2016, Kon Tum

100 books written over the last century about the ethnic groups in Vietnam. Most of them are rare French editions written by people who lived in Vietnam during the Indochina period. However, I also have some texts in Vietnamese as well as government surveys … basically, any information I could get my hands on to learn more about their evolution. Often, there wasn't a lot of information available for the smaller, lesser known, and/or isolated groups, so I knew my research would have to be done in person. The second phase of my research was to visit the villages where the ethnic groups live. At this point, I would talk to the villagers, learn about their textile traditions, and take a portrait of a tribal member in his or her traditional garments. During these interactions, I took as many notes as I could about their legends, rituals and whether certain facets of their lifestyle had been lost over time. I also recorded their music in hopes of learning more from the lyrics. Often, the information I received directly from the tribes varied dramatically from published research I'd read before visiting. The third phase of research was

to take all of the new information I'd gained during my visits and then go back to my books to try to learn why a certain ethnic group sang about coming from the Philippines when history books said they originated in Laos, for example. Or researching certain motifs used on textiles, etc. And finally, the fourth stage of research was to return again to the villages, or other villages where the ethnic group resided, to see how they evolved over time and to speak with other members of the group to compare perspectives.

That's an enormous undertaking! Now that you've officially completed your goal of meeting all 54 ethnic groups, what's next for the Precious Heritage Project?

The project will never truly be over. There are still subgroups not included in the list, and I've formed lasting relationships with these communities. I'll continue updating their portraits, collecting artifacts, and maintaining my commitments to the people I've had the honor to meet over the last decade.

In addition, this project marked a shift in the way that I considered my work. The duration of the project meant intense periods of research as well as travel. I've read every text I could possibly find in French, English or Vietnamese that tells the origin stories of each ethnic group. Many texts were not available, in which case, I listened to the lyrics of the tribal music, or gathered legends directly from the people themselves. This element of research is something that I have absolutely carried over into my other projects.

Nhi and Grandma, 2019, Hoang Su Phi

An Phuoc, 2015, Viet Nam

CONVERSATION
ABOUT CUBA

Réhahn's work often focuses on the symbiotic relationship between culture and Fine Art. This theme, which runs throughout his various collections, manifests in different ways. In his Cuba series, his portraits strip away superfluous details to zoom in on the personalities of locals. From cigar smokers to soccer players, these portraits were born from interactions that took place over the course of more than 21 visits to the country, contributing to the artist's understanding of the intricate layers of Cuban society. The emphasis on "making" photographs rather than merely "taking" them, preserves the humanity of subjects and tells their stories with respect, emotion, and depth.

When Réhahn speaks of his encounters, they always seem intertwined with the ritual of smoking cigars, effectively becoming a bridge connecting the photographer with his subjects and their stories.

Ginarte, Réhahn and Edel in Cuba

Why do you think you were first drawn to Cuba?

To begin with, I wanted to know about its controversial history. My history teacher when I was in secondary school made me really passionate about the Cold War. That's why I went to Cuba, and Vietnam the same year. I wanted to learn more about that period in history and see how it continued to affect real people, not just by reading about it in books. When I first visited, it seemed stuck between two eras - Kennedy/Castro and modern life. I fell in love with the spirit of the country immediately. It combined several things that I appreciate - beautiful architecture and views, traditions that are still inherent in daily life, and kind people.

You've been back every year (barring the Covid years) since your first visit in 2007. It's one thing to enjoy a destination, but another thing entirely to adopt it as a second home. You've traveled all over the world, so why do you have this love affair with Cuba?

I smoked my first cigar in Cuba and that has become a lifelong passion. But people might also be surprised to learn that even though I have many well-known photos of Cuba, I often travel there without my camera. I go to spend time with Edel, my Cuban "brother", and relax. I bought a home there a few years ago for Edel, so it feels like coming home to me as well. We bought another house recently in the Old Center, and we're planning to rent his house with another Cuban friend, Herminio, the former Cuban Ambassador in Hanoi, also a cigar smoker. The other thing that keeps drawing me back to the country is the conversations. Cubans are philosophers at heart and I love debating about everything from politics to wine, cigars to art with my companions.

Can you tell me more about Edel?

I first met Edel in 2007, when he was my taxi driver during my first trip to Havana. Edel introduced me to the ritual of smoking cigars, which was like a gateway into Cuban culture. Since then, we've shared stories, cigars, and formed a deep familial connection. We share a common passion for music, and I've spent hours with him listening to great music and talking about groups like The Eagles, Police, and Queen. We've also talked a lot about the Cold War. Edel introduced me to his wife, Midiala, and his daughter Daniela. She was only 7 months old the day I first met her, now she's 16! They've become my second family.

Emilio and Réhahn

"Cuba has become a family affair. I spend 99% of my time with my friends, smoking cigars, and discussing a thousand things. This is MY time!"

La Habana, 2014, Cuba

Réhahn in his house in Cuba

How has the ritual of smoking cigars become an integral part of your Cuban experience, and what role do they play in your photographic journeys?

Smoking cigars in Cuba is more than a tradition; it's a rewarding moment, a connection to the country's heritage. Every Cuban knows the big cigar names and their history.

Smoking cigars with locals has become a way for me to interact with people and capture the essence of Cuban life in my photographs. If I decide to bring my camera with me, I always head out with several good cigars in my pockets. It makes it easier for me to approach people if I offer them a smoke but it is also an opportunity to make a new friend. Cigars aren't something that you finish quickly. They give time for conversation. I've met many good friends this way.

Do you speak Spanish?

¡Por supuesto! I love getting a chance to converse in Spanish when I'm there.

Francisco, 2012, Cuba

Daniel, 2016, Cuba

Can you share any details about some of your favorite subjects like Elva, Daniel, and Francisco?

Elva epitomized the Cuban spirit with her fierce demeanor. Although she smoked cigars for tourists, sharing a Cohiba Esplendido with her led to profound conversations about history and her country. Similarly, Daniel, an 85-year-old gentleman, shared his connection to Vietnam during the Cuban government's symbolic gift of building a hotel. I loved the serendipity of meeting him and we've remained good friends. Francisco, a Cuban I met by the train tracks, represents Cuba's tougher side. He had a strong character, but he was also willing to just sit and smoke with someone he'd just met. I love that openness about the country.

Can you describe the style of your Cuban portraits?

They tend to be quite close-up and colorful because I want to capture the details of the faces, in the hope that the personalities of my subjects will come across. Yet, they aren't as formal as my Precious Heritage portraits. I want it to seem as if the viewer could pause for a moment and continue the conversation with the subject, or share a cigar like I did. I hope one day to open a gallery in Cuba and spend a few months a year in *La Habana*.

Elva

Réhahn's passion for capturing the essence of cultures through portraiture is exemplified in his annual pilgrimage to Cuba. He freezes moments within intimate portraits of local characters, including his well-known photo of a fiery 73-year-old woman named Elva.

The Context

In 2013, after many visits to Cuba, the artist encountered a remarkable woman whose fierce presence demanded attention. Her red flowers and cigar place her firmly in Old Havana, yet, there was something about her that was reminiscent of Frida Kahlo. Curiosity led Réhahn to sit down with her and offer her a cigar. Their shared hour of smoking and conversations about history and Cuba marked the beginning of a lasting bond, which continued until she passed away in 2016. In death, as in life, Elva's essence continues to echo through the portrait, showcasing the power of photography to immortalize and transcend borders.

The Composition

The color palette is predominantly beige with a pop of red. Even though the neutral tone takes up 3/4th of the composition, it fades into the background, overshadowed by the intensity of the flowers and the expression on Elva's face. Réhahn's intimate approach and ability to capture Elva's character and resilience are evident in the composition, making this portrait an iconic representation of the spirit of Cuba.

The portrait was recently used in a collaborative collection with the French marquetry house Elie Bleu to adorn a humidor, lighter and ash tray.

Elva, 2013, Cuba

CONVERSATION
ABOUT LAYERS AND ARTISTIC PERIODS

For many, "layers" are the great difference between photography and painting. How does one add texture to photographic paper? How can one give a photograph the same sense of gravitas that we feel when we gaze at layers of paint and think, 'This was touched by Monet or Van Gogh or Rembrandt …'? Isn't photography devoid of layers, since a photo can be created in an instant?

Yet, layers are as much conceptual as they are tactile. A painter isn't simply adding paint to a canvas. Each stroke represents a mental process of observations and adjustments. They reveal the artist's training and influences; their history and techniques. A photographer works in a similar way. Even if art historians in the future won't be able to chip away at layers of paint or look at the photograph with an infrared light to understand hidden details or processes in the underpainting, that preliminary study is still there. Photographers often taken hundreds of photos in order to get one finished work. Certain artists return over and over to the same spot or subject, trying to unravel something that only they can see. The process of writing is similar. We throw words at the page, pull some off, add some more, delete, add, delete, add, until what remains is a story that is as much about the artistic process as whatever subject is being covered. Yet, in photography like writing, this process remains mostly invisible to the reader or the viewer.

Layers, whether formed from paint, digital footprints, or years of experience, are an essential part of any artist's work and journey. With retrospect, we can see how these layers all add up to "artistic periods." In the same way that historians can understand the present by looking at what happened in the past, these layers allow us to look at an artist's body of work and see how they are all interconnected, even when the periods can vary dramatically in style and content. In these compiled conversations with Réhahn, we discuss layers in both the compositional and conceptual sense to gain a better understanding of his artistic process.

Your recent Impressionism photographs have received a lot of attention because of the way that they trick the eye into believing that they are created from layers of paint rather than being processed onto photographic paper. Why did shift your style to use this kind of distortion?

I spent a lot of time studying the texture in the works of the Impressionists. They were fond of using thick layers of oil paint that raised the canvas with texture and color. This texture was another part of their rebellion. Rather than smoothing everything into a polite, glossy depiction of reality, they wanted the paint to be the point. As if they were saying, *'This is not reality. This is a process.'*

Each of those layers of dried paint represented time, effort and style - a signature that is as individual as one's handwriting. I obviously can't add this sort of three-dimensional texture to my photos; however, when I discovered my technique for shooting through heat distortion, I felt that some of that spontaneity and style came across.

You use the word "spontaneity", yet in reality these photos take a lot of effort, don't they?

Yes. People often have the idea that photography takes less effort than other art forms, yet, that's wholly untrue. A child can paint a painting in a minute, just like an amateur photographer can snap a few pics. However, if you are really trying to get across an artistic idea or a specific subject, this takes hundreds of hours of research, and studies, missed photos, and "light chasing" before you can get the idea across. For my heat photos, it also requires very specific timing and physical endurance. They are shot only when the farmers are burning their fields to refresh the soil and to create ash to nourish their peanut gardens. This typically happens twice a year in Hoi An. When I know that they are burning, I rush to the location to shoot. Then what transpires is hours and hours of shooting in intense heat, with smoke, flying ash, and the danger of getting too close to the fire. The spontaneity only refers to what I can actually shoot. I can't control, for example, what the farmer does, what they look like, or wear. I can't control the weather or the light, etc. But, it's worth it, because of the way that the heat distortion creates a paint-like texture on the image.

How did you get here? Your previous works, especially your portraits, have a completely different style.

I am often asked this question by my collectors. They don't always see the through-line between my earlier work and what I'm doing now. But with a bit of reflection, it becomes clear. My first portraits were inspired by my love of travel. Because I enjoyed talking to people and hearing their stories when I traveled, the stories eventually took precedence over the actual photos. They led me to my "Ageless Beauty", "Hidden Smile", and, especially, my "Precious Heritage" projects. These three projects took more than a decade of work - not because I was traveling around snapping pictures of people. But because I was digging deep into the layers of cultural, societal, and historical contexts of each series as I shot. I primarily focused on people who lived in the countryside - people who were deeply rooted in their work as artisans and other heritage jobs. As a result, near the end of my Precious Heritage project, I began shooting traditional fishermen, net crafters, incense and mat makers, ceramicists etc., which became my lifestyle collection of

Blue Windows, 2014, Hoi An

Balance, 2015, Hoi An

images. Rather than shooting these subjects in a documentary style, I was attracted to the colors of their tools and crafts as well as the natural light, since many of these people worked outside. My interest turned more and more towards capturing the fleeting effects of light on nature, textures and colors of the Vietnamese countryside. This naturally led me to the works of the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, since they were obsessed with the transparancy of light and the parallel world of reflections.

It's interesting to understand how your process evolved over the course of your career. Do you feel like each of these different styles can be classified as "periods"?

This is something that is difficult to clarify for oneself. In a way, each artist needs an outside eye to separate their work in this way. Art historians can now look at Picasso's work, for example, and see that his "Blue Period" occurred after the suicide of his dear friend. He began his "Pink Period" when he met his wife. He also experimented with many different techniques, borrowing from his peers before finding his own style - he even tried pointillism at one point. Van Gogh's works are also completely tied to his own life experiences and mental health. He began using brighter colors when he moved to the South of France, for example. And, he was greatly influenced by the works of the Impressionists, even if his own work is considered to be Post-Impressionism because of the emotional quality and colors. I know my influences and also how my work has changed based on where I lived and what was going on in my life, but I hope my viewers can look at each stylistic change objectively and find what connects to them personally.

One period we can see clearly in your work is your "Yellow Period." Can you talk a little about why you were inspired by this particular color and how that evolved in your work?

My "Yellow Period", as you put it, began when I moved to Hoi An. Yellow is the traditional color used to paint buildings in the Old Town. It's a color that has been used for centuries to represent royalty and to bring prosperity and happiness, among other things. For me,

I loved the links between the patina of the old buildings, the light of the sun on the waterways that flow through the area, as well as the burnished color of the rice fields just before the harvest. Living here, truly feels like living in *"Fields of Gold,"* as Sting put it. It was natural for me to photograph what was around me. However, over time, I became obsessed with certain color combinations - such as blue and yellow. This was a combination that was often used by Van Gogh, Turner, and Pissarro - three artists I greatly admire. I've focused on blue outside of Vietnam as well. For example, in Krishna, a portrait I shot in Varanasi, India, I was attracted to the sapphire blue of the child's *"Krishna"* makeup, which was such a different color than the sky blue in the Vietnamese countryside. My work has changed a bit in recent photographs. I've been more attracted to yellows and blues on the darker side of the spectrum in my photographs. I think that the pandemic years added a moodier tone.

Krishna, 2019, India

Glowing Field, 2022, Hoi An

LIFE TRACE, GOLDEN FIELDS, AND RESTING GOLD

Réhahn's Fine Art photographs "Life Trace," "Golden Fields," and "Resting Gold" represent a pivotal link between the artist's Yellow Period and Impressionist Period. They offer a nuanced exploration of the emotional quality of gold, yellow, and ocher, as used by artists such as Van Gogh and Turner, throughout history. The compositional techniques used in these photographs mark a stylistic change that builds on the artist's series about artisanal skills, traditional jobs and Hoi An's heritage. The photographs utilize several compositional techniques that align with influences from Impressionism and Japonism, notably verticality, tight cropping, and a focus on the natural world.

In this analysis, I delve into the interplay of subject, colors, and layout within these three key pieces to decipher the intricate dialogue between influence and an evolution that is built on both personal history and artistic heritage.

LIFE TRACE

The Composition

The tones in the work are an homage to Van Gogh's affinity for the color yellow. Yellow has associations of renewal, hope, and royalty in Vietnam. Yet, it can also ground the work in a specific place. Van Gogh's infatuation with the color yellow can be traced to his sojourn in Arles, France, where he reveled in the sun-drenched hues of the region. The artist's adopted home of Hoi An, Vietnam is also a place where the color yellow takes a central role.

The golden hues infuse the photograph with warmth and vitality. Each element, from the winding path to the steadfast reeds of grass, contributes to harmony, inviting contemplation of the intersection between the mundane and the profound.

The photograph also has a strong sense of verticality that draws the viewer beyond the borders of the photograph. This is a composition technique that is most often associated with the Japonism movement in 19th-century Europe, but can also be traced to artists such as Camille Pissarro and Cezanne who were fascinated with the symbol of paths in their paintings.

The Context

In *"Life Trace,"* a golden field becomes a metaphor for life's journey. The photograph captures the transient imprints, akin to memories, etched into the rice. Set within the backdrop of Hoi An in 2021, the work explores the nature of existence - forging forward into the unknown without knowing what might lay on the other side.

Life Trace, 2021, Hoi An

GOLDEN FIELD

2020, Hoi An

The Composition

The work is tightly cropped in a style similar to Japanese blockprints. We see the fisherman's back, yet we don't see what he is walking towards. Our perspective is slightly behind and above. Giving us a limited bird's-eye view. This compositional choice puts our focus on the colors of the scene and, more importantly, on the texture of the sheathes of grain.

The Context

In *"Golden Fields,"* Réhahn captures a dynamic dance between nature and human resilience in the aftermath of a typhoon in Vietnam, 2020. The subject in the work is a fisherman walking into a flooded rice field with the hope of catching a fish washed in from the sea during the storm. Echoing the brushstrokes of Post-Impressionist artists like Van Gogh, the tones of the flooded rice fields and the blue shirt of the farmer transcend the static beauty of the rural landscape. The photograph narrates the resilience of the Vietnamese people. It's a celebration of the unexpected, reminding us that even in the aftermath of disaster, there's life waiting on the other side.

RESTING GOLD

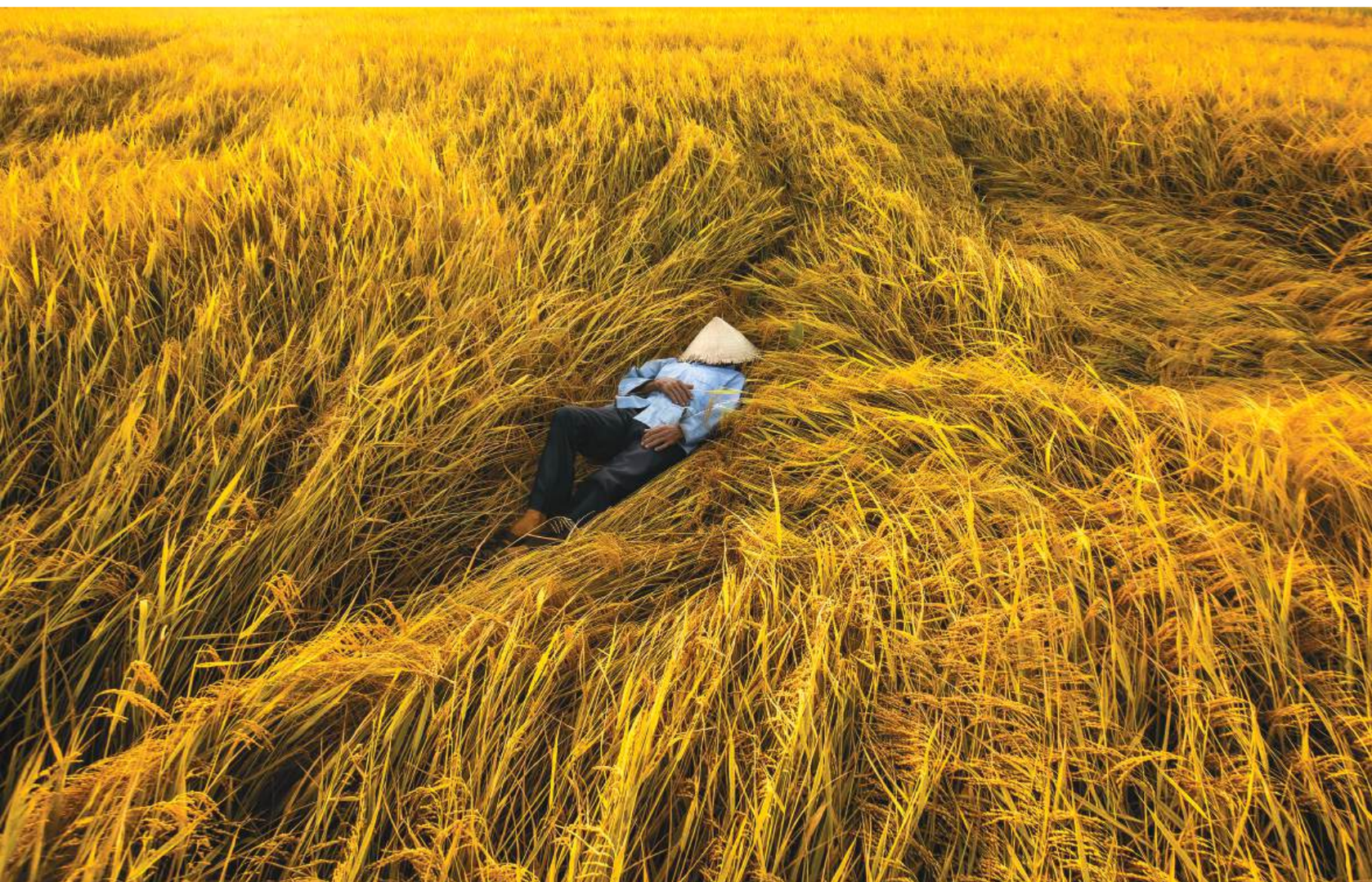
2021, Hoi An

The Composition

The work is once again shot with a close crop on the subject. We don't have a horizon line, nor additional context about what lays beyond this farmer asleep in his field. The colors - sky blue and gold - reflect a traditional Impressionist palette with echoes of Van Gogh and Pissarro at play. This exploration traverses geographical and temporal boundaries, showcasing how certain themes remain universal despite the passage of time and cultural differences.

The Context

"Resting Gold" captures the essence of tranquility in Vietnam, 2021, reminiscent of Romantics and Impressionists who explored yellow's symbolic power. In this composition, the farmer becomes a character in a living fable, where the golden fields are not just a backdrop but an integral part of the narrative.



CONVERSATION
ABOUT TRADITIONAL JOBS AND SLOW LIVING

Réhahn has spent his career focusing on rural contexts. He gravitates towards places that seem lost in time - resilient to the forward push of development and technology. Through Réhahn's lens, it seems as if these locations could have been photographed in 1824 or 2024. The people who inhabit them maintain traditional jobs that have been passed down through generations such as farming, incense making, fishing, textile crafts, and pottery.

Known for capturing the essence of these heritage occupations, the artist shares encounters with artisans, fishermen, and custodians of cultural traditions, to show the patience, resilience, and history of each craft.

Your Scenes of Life photographs could be said to represent and celebrate "slow living." What drew you to these subjects?

Throughout my travels, I've encountered countless individuals whose lives revolve around traditional jobs. These jobs not only sustain them but also play a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage. Slow living, to me, represents a counterbalance to the fast-paced modern world, offering a glimpse into a more intentional and mindful way of life. Artisanal crafts and farming are an important part of the lives and livelihood of the ethnic groups.

You've mentioned that your interest in these jobs came from The Precious Heritage Project. How do your newer photographs of artisans differ from the work you did for your cultural museum?

The Precious Heritage Project deepened my interest in these generational skills. When I finished the project in 2020, I decided to focus my attention on depicting these jobs in a new way. Not focusing on the difficulty of the work as much as creating a palette with the textures and colors inherent in the crafts. It's about appreciating the simplicity and depth found in these traditional occupations, which can serve as a reminder to embrace a slower, more intentional way of living.

Do you believe that these ways of life can coexist with the rapid advancements of the modern world?

It's not about rejecting progress but finding a harmonious balance. Traditional jobs hold intrinsic value, and integrating them into our modern lives can bring a sense of continuity. For example, I've spent hundreds of hours observing, photographing, and talking to artisans, farmers, and fishermen in Vietnam. Their daily routine, reliance on age-old techniques, and sense of community always strikes a chord with me. It makes me realize the richness that traditional jobs bring to society. It's a matter of preserving our roots while evolving with the times.

Your photographs capture the beauty of fishing not only as a livelihood but as an art form. How do you approach conveying the patience and resilience of fishermen and net menders in your images?

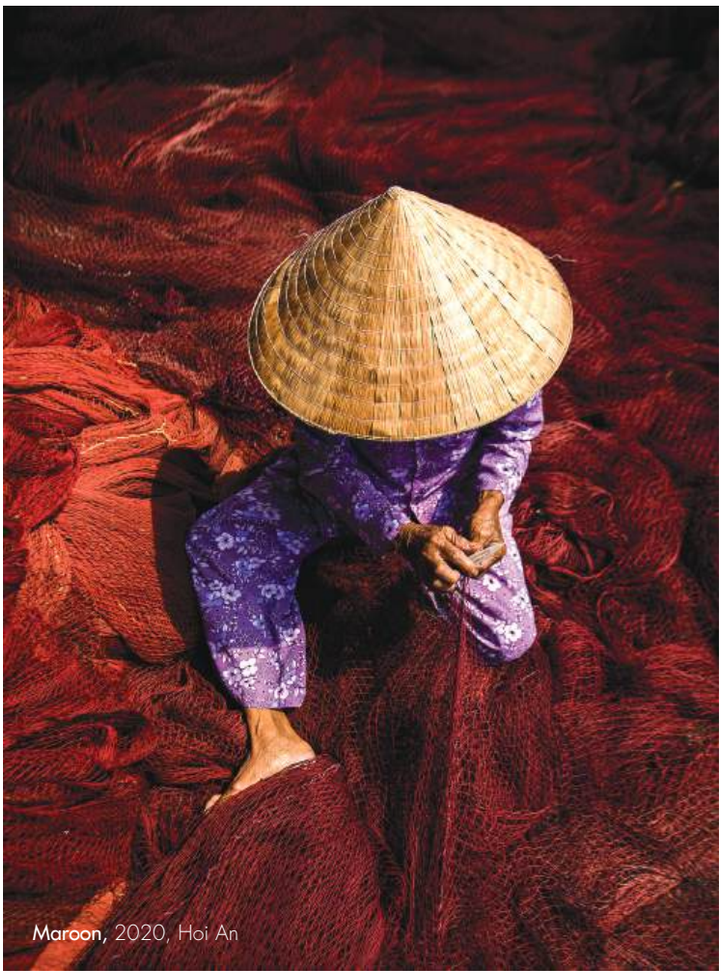
Building a connection with people is key. It's about observing the quiet moments—the bobbing of the boat, the anticipation in the air as the net is cast at sunrise. Patience is not only a virtue for the fishermen but also for me as a photographer. Waiting for that perfect moment when the elements align requires a similar dedication. I wanted to capture the poetry in everyday activities.

Your series of women mending fishing nets has become one of your most popular collections. They are very different from your portraits. Instead, the images are surreal, focusing on the colors and textures of the net, more than the people. The women in the images seem to be floating in the ocean rather than netting. Can you explain why you made this stylistic choice?

In *"Ocean Dream"*, *"Maroon"*, *"Into the Wave"*, and *"Aquamarine"*, I wanted to capture the intangible—the beauty of jobs that remain mostly invisible to the public. The hands of these net menders moved with a grace born of years of practice. The quietude of the moment, the deliberate nature of each motion, spoke volumes about their knowledge. It was a reminder that these heritage jobs are not just about the final product; they are about the journey, the connection to the past, and the act of preserving traditions.

When I look at these photos, they remind me of the story of the Fates in Greek mythology - the goddesses who controlled the destinies of every person by spinning, measuring, and eventually cutting the threads of life.

I am always fascinated by the cycles of birth, aging, and death. I see these women as a point of calm within the storm of life. The force of their concentration gives them power.



Maroon, 2020, Hoi An

Ocean Dream, 2023, Hoi An

RESILIENCE & DREAM

"Resilience" and "Dream I & II" were created during the long days of confinement, when daily life was completely shut down. In tourist destinations, such as Hoi An, there was a deafening silence, devoid of visitors, that left most artisans, micro-businesses, and restaurants entirely without income. Some Vietnamese turned to fishing to try to make a living.

This was the subject of an article in The New York Times series "A Year Without Travel" in March 2021, which featured Réhahn's photos. The story followed a man who had lost his restaurant after it collapsed due to an intense typhoon. Lack of capital from tourism drove him to return to traditional basket boat fishing to get by. Réhahn's documentary-style images illustrated the article, yet, the artist felt there was more to the subject. The Fine Art photographs "Resilience" and "Dream" were born from this project and the theme of perseverance.

RESILIENCE

The elderly man in "*Resilience*" stands and looks at a choppy ocean, casting his line despite the odds - an allegory for the resilience of the human spirit in the face of uncertainty.

In Hoi An, October typically marks the most intense month of the rainy season. Typhoons, flooding, and stormy seas are common, yet, during the pandemic, this seasonal "tantrum" also made the necessity of fishing much harder. The fierce sky above the powerful horizon line of the sea sets the background for the man in the orange raincoat - a color that the artist has described as "a glimmer of hope."

This subject on the beach, reminded the artist of Hemingway's masterpiece, "The Old Man and the Sea." In the novel, an elderly Cuban fisherman confronts the ocean in an epic struggle with a marlin and his own endurance.

The photograph asks - What does courage mean? Is it a public display of heroism or is it a deep battle within oneself to keep going, to find a path, however indiscernible it may seem.

The Composition

The use of the horizon line interrupted by the white froth of the breakers balances the composition almost equally between solid ground and the threatening sky. In this moment, time has stopped, and all that matters is the thin thread of hope that connects the man to the water and beyond. The horizontal lines inherent in the seascape are augmented by the artist's choice to frame the man slightly to the right of center, giving the viewer the sense that the beach carries on beyond the frame, in the same way that the ocean continues into the distance.

The image combines texture and color to give the sense of seeing the scene in four stages:

1. The sand behind the man invites the viewer into the composition, as if one is standing just off-screen watching him brave the elements.

2. The second layer reveals the fisherman, who is as much shape and shadow as he is man. His raincoat hangs off his body in complex pleats. Each fold of the plastic material gives us light and darkness, movement and staticity - like a frame of a film paused to allow us to study the force of the wind and water. The non la hat adds curves to the strong lines in the image. This traditional symbol almost seems out of place in the setting, a light head covering that could be swept away in the storm, yet, despite odds, it remains firmly in place.

3. The final stage is that of the sea and sky. Logically, we understand that the sky is all around the man … above, behind, and beyond. Yet, in this composition, flattened onto the two-dimensional plane, the sky seems to connect to the water, like a graduated watercolor wash with only slight differences in tone.

4. The palette unites shades from opposite sides of the color wheel, the slate blue and orange tones in the photograph play off one another, harmonizing and adding depth to the mood.

Resilience, 2021, Hoi An

"We should never accept defeat despite difficulties. This is one of the greatest qualities of the Vietnamese people. They proved it during the war and now during the pandemic."

DREAM & DREAM II

The Compositions

In *"Dream II"*, originally published in *The New York Times* in March 2020, a man stands alone in his basket boat hoping for a good catch. The colors in the image merge into one another, with no clear demarcation between sky and sea. This "lost" horizon is a metaphor for the Covid-19 pandemic - a blurry future with no end in sight.

Like *"Dream II", "Dream"* was shot while the artist was on location for *The New York Times*, however, this photograph was created for his personal collection. The theme remains the same - a man on his boat, alone in the ocean. However, the style is reimagined. Here, the artist uses the effects of the setting sun to throw the subject into silhouette. The viewer's gaze is focused on the "negative space" that is created with the man's body and boat. Recasting the subject as an anonymous figure, a symbol, creates a sense of mystery. The amber and grey tones in the water and the sky heighten the play between light and shadow.

Dream, 2021, Hoi An

The Context

The contextual clues in *"Resilience", "Dream" and "Dream II"* open like a puzzle box. Many of the artist's most recognized portraits were shot in Cuba - where Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea" was also set. During the worldwide confinement, the globe was united against a common enemy - something which, like the old man's marlin, was dangerous and illusory. From Cuba to Vietnam, the artist erases boundaries. The man becomes every man. A fighter out of necessity; a believer that perhaps hope is always just over the horizon.

Dream II, 2021, Hoi An

THE NEIGHBORS

"My idea was to create the feeling of internal solitude without sadness."

The Neighbors, 2022, Hoi An

In 2022, the world was just beginning its long road to recovery from a collective trauma. Isolation, loneliness, and anxiety were the keywords of the pandemic years. Yet, The Neighbors goes further. The image explores what it feels like to be isolated in a space with other people. How does it feel to be psychologically alone, yet physically together? How can one be alone but not necessarily lonely, emotionally inaccessible, yet not despondent.

This concept was first analyzed at length in the 1940s by the painter Edward Hopper. Hopper's muse was the anonymity of urban living, rather than the countryside. He used the harshness of fluorescent lighting within New York City interiors, framed so that the viewer felt like a voyeur looking in at people to catch a glimpse of the alienation that can come from big city living.

In contrast, The Neighbors is a study about the separate spaces that two people can inhabit within a rural environment. Far from the "film noir" style of Hopper's work, The Neighbors reveals space and serenity, but what about human connection?

The Atmosphere

The background of the photograph is a typical home in the Vietnamese countryside. The decor is sparse - a bed with no mattress, just a thin tatami mat, which older generations in Vietnam prefer. Yet, there is charm within the scarcity, evoking minimalism without dearth. The scene depicts the routine of daily life and solitary habits. This atmosphere is heightened with the knowledge of cultural expectations. Vietnamese families are not as nuclear as many Western ones. It is common for grandparents, parents, children, and even aunts and uncles to live within the same home.

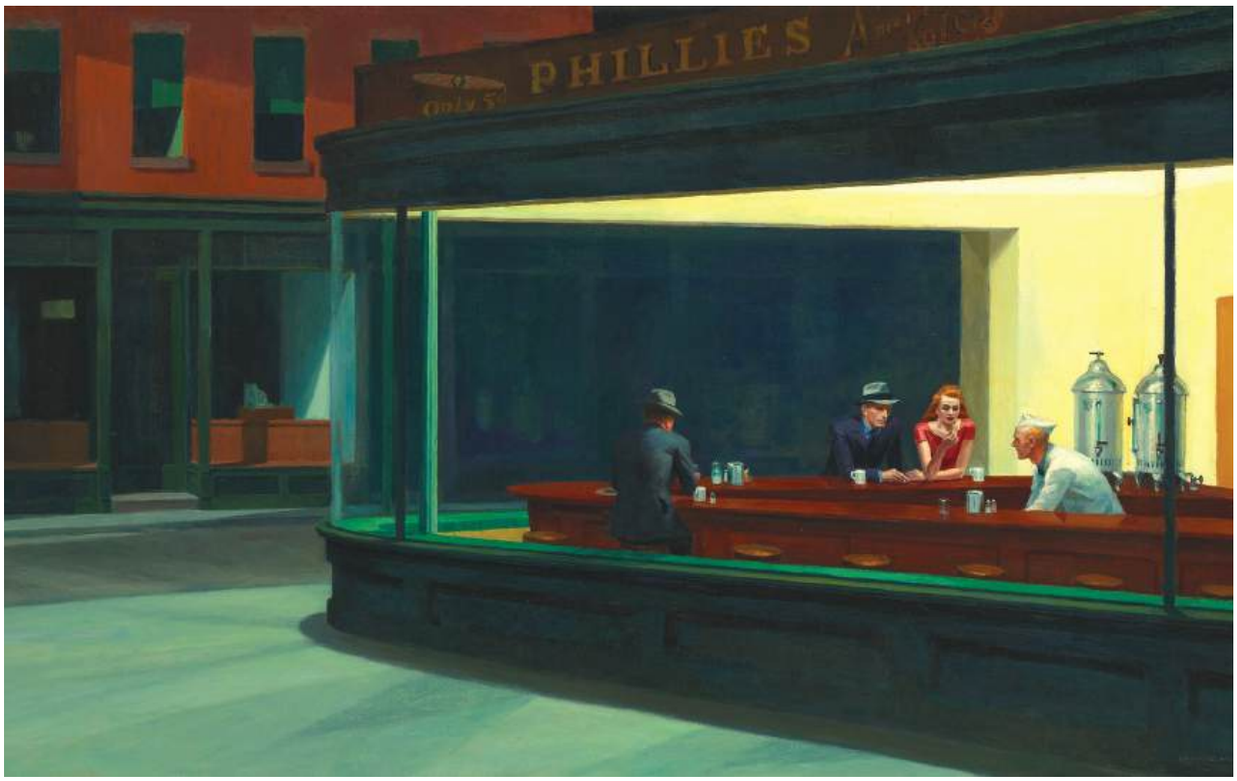
However, in a changing society brought on by the influx of development and commerce in the country, children often travel far from their rural homes for work. As a result, the elderly increasingly stay alone.

The Composition

The composition is very different from that of the artist's previous works. He used a "frame within a frame" technique to add to the feeling of confinement between the two rooms in the apartment. The lines of the doorway and tiled floors are straight and geometric, adding to the angular effect of the scene. The continuous lines of the wooden floor planks in the foreground draw the viewer's eye away from the woman and towards the figure in the background … a figure whose details are dimmed, almost like an afterthought or a shadow. The only curves that soften the scene are those of the bodies of the people and the non la hat hanging on the wall. We see these two humans who ultimately must know each other intimately, yet remain separate. The artist has described their forms "like two ships passing in the night."

The sense of seeing the subjects from the outside is further heightened by the artist's choice to crop the photograph into a perfect square. The couple is placed in a metaphysical box, a construction of the artist's vision.

The photograph is far from being a copy of Hopper's style. It uses Hopper's moody atmosphere as a starting point, but it layered within the context of Vietnamese psychology to form a composition that is both contemporary and timeless. The story of the human links that bind us invisibly, without resistance. Instead, these links are peaceful, reminders of the importance of quiet companionship that exists parallel to our own internal voices.



Edward Hopper, Nighthawks, Oil on canvas,
Art Institute of Chicago

The Palette

The phthalo green wall that dominates the color scheme is a tone that is often used within rural houses; though it has increasingly fallen out of favor in contemporary homes. It creates a wash across the composition, like a stroke of paint. Indeed, the tone is close to the greens that can be found in Hopper's work.

The bright illumination of natural light on the elderly woman in the foreground, with her orchid-colored shirt and the daub of scarlet red on the wall, creates an effect that is almost spiritual, similar to iconography that has been created throughout history. The woman seems lost in thought. Her focus is serene and internal, almost meditative. Her face brings tranquility to the domestic scene, without melancholia.

The Context

Réhahn's previous path as an artist logically led to this work. His major projects, The Precious Heritage Project and Ageless Beauty, were essentially complete. Their focus on the elderly, their stories, their sentiments, had consumed the artist for more than a decade. And then the pandemic hit. Like so many others, the artist was confined to his home, wondering how the people around him (especially his elderly friends) were faring.

The subjects in The Neighbors lived near Réhahn. They were people he would often visit with before the pandemic hit. Hopper was an introvert. He interacted with the world from the outside in. In terms of personality, Réhahn is not known to be an introvert, yet he rarely chooses to be amongst people. He is not a misanthrope, but in interviews he often speaks more about his time spent reading than socializing and the disconnection he feels when seeing people staring into their smartphones rather than conversing.

Whether a product of the time or an intentional move on Réhahn's part, this choice to depict the negative space between physical proximity and psychological separation effectively symbolized the mood of the early 2020's, creating an iconic depiction of these lost years.

Madam Ha, 2021, Hoi An

Réhahn's work often depicts people from his daily life. People that he meets over and over again as he walks through his community, stopping for tea with a neighbor or chatting with the farmers or fishermen that he regularly photographs.

The works *"Madame Ha"* and *"The Neighbors"* couldn't be more different stylistically. One brings a smile to the lips, a cheerful reminder of simple pleasures. The other is a contemplation of solitude within family relationships. Yet, the two works share a common subject - Madame Ha. Her peaceful demeanor and youthful spirit create a powerful focus in both portraits. In person, she is always happy and was the perfect subject to show loneliness without sadness.

"Réhahn's previous path as an artist logically led to the creation of "The Neighbors." His major projects, The Precious Heritage Project and Ageless Beauty, were essentially complete. Their focus on the elderly, their stories, their sentiments, had consumed the artist for more than a decade. And then the pandemic hit. Like so many others, the artist was confined to his home, wondering how the people around him (especially his elderly friends) were faring."

CONVERSATION
ABOUT INFLUENCES AND IMPRESSIONISM

Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe, by Édouard Manet, 1862–1863

Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe d'après Manet, by Pablo Picasso, 1960

The word '"influence" holds many meanings. Read in the positive sense, it can mean "inspiration". In the negative sense, it can be interpreted as control or manipulation. This dual significance is perhaps part of the reason that influences in art are often so contentious. Yet, what is often disregarded in the defining of influence is its inherent difference to "imitation." The former takes a painting or a story or piece of music and reimagines it with a new voice and vision. The latter tries to recreate something with exactitude.

Édouard Manet's provocative painting "Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe" or "Luncheon on the Grass" has been reconceptualized countless times; most notably by the painters - Claude Monet and Pablo Picasso. More recently, an exhibit in 2022 at Jeffrey Deitch gallery in Los Angeles, invited more than 30 contemporary artists to respond to Manet's iconic work. Each interpretation takes an element of the scene - specifically, people sitting casually on grass, yet, the final results are so completely tied to the artist's own experiences and styles that they become something entirely "other."

In this regard, influence encompasses both inspiration and control - the artists are bound by the gravitational pull of the original work—it shapes certain facets, grounding the new works in history—yet, it is only a starting point from which individual creativity can form with boundless energy.

The rules for influence have been a subject of many conversations with Réhahn.

Kaleidoscope, 2023, Hoi An

How does one pay homage to certain works while maintaining individual style?

Molière was inspired by the Commedia dell'arte; La Fontaine by Aesop's fables. Van Gogh was influenced by Japonisme but also by Jean Francois Millet … it goes on. Their idea wasn't to replicate or copy. It was to see things in a new way.

In "A Bigger Message", Martin Gayford's book about the painter David Hockney, Hockney is quoted as saying:

"I'm not sure which modernist critic said that it wasn't possible to do anything with landscape anymore. But when people say things like that, I'm always perverse enough to think, 'Oh, I'm sure it is.' I thought about it, then I decided that it couldn't be true because every generation looks differently. Of course, you can still paint landscape - it's not been worn out."

Do you agree with Hockney? Is there always something new to see?

This is the age-old debate. How to remain innovative when "everything has already been done", as people say? I agree with Hockney. I don't think that, even if man spent another millennium creating art on this earth, that there would ever be an end to originality. True artists—not imitators—are fed by the world around them, their history, and their own vision. The way that this mix of references manifests in different people, different mediums, different contexts, and time periods can affect the viewer in new and important ways.

You've become a sort of expert on Impressionism as you've researched your *"Memories of Impressionism"* project. Do you still think that there are new details to be learned about Impressionism now, more than 130 years after the movement ended?

(laughs) I certainly wouldn't call myself an expert, since there are people who have written their PhD theses on this very subject. However, my approach is different. I learn and then I apply what I learn. The more that I learn, the more tools I have to play with. I would say that my artistic process for this project and the Precious

Heritage project have been approximately 70% research to 30% actively making art. The thing that I find fascinating is that with art history you pull one thread and it leads to another and another and another. There are always more links to be explored as well as differences in definitions. For example, you mentioned that it has been more than 130 years since Impressionism ended. However, even that is debateable!

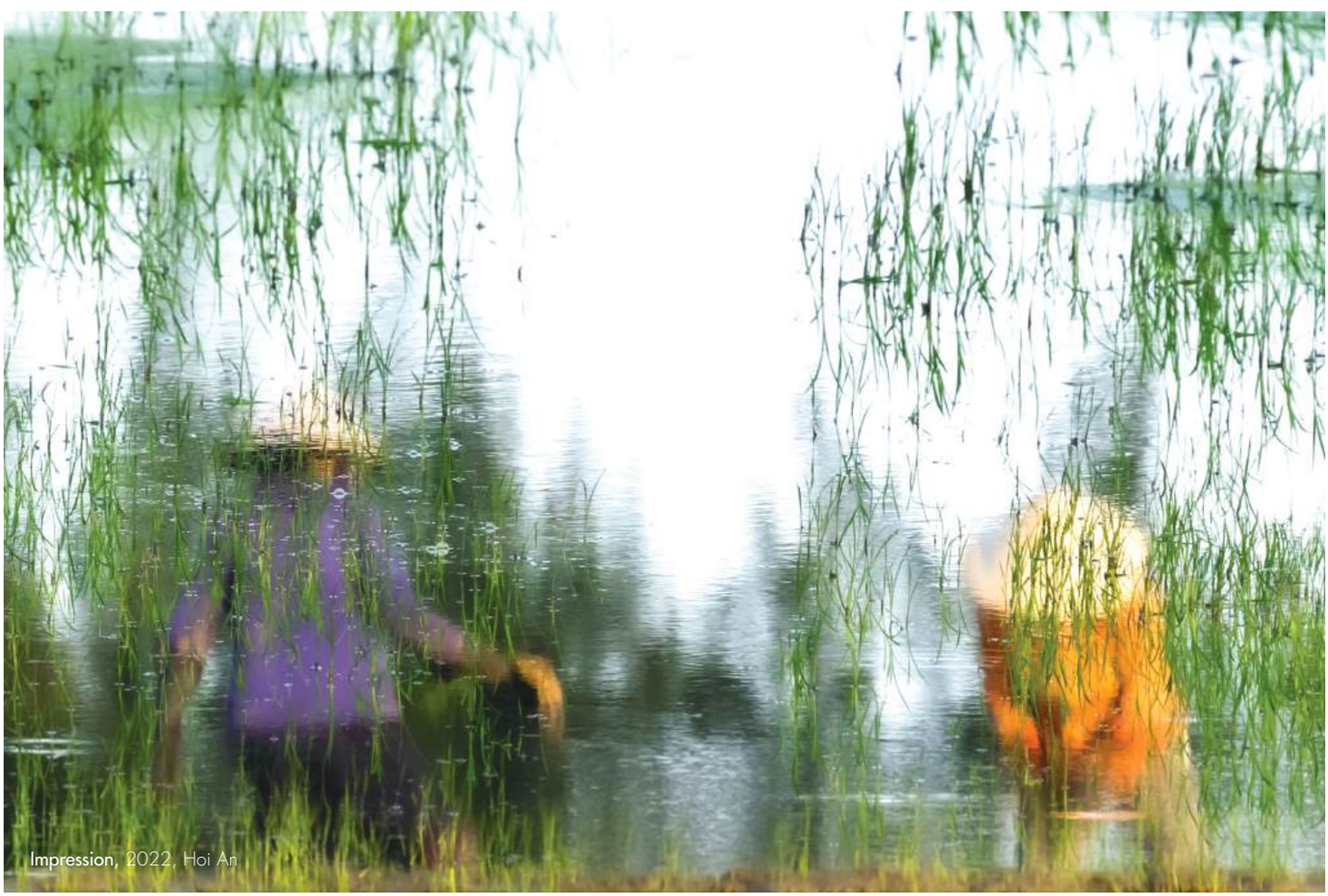
Really? Can you explain?

In his book, "History of Impressionism" (1946) John Rewald is the first to mention the end of the Impressionist movement with the last exhibition in 1886.

But not all art historians agree with this date. Olivier Schuwer, a professor at the Sorbonne in Paris, wrote an article called: "An Objective Fiction: John Rewald and the Invention of the End of Impressionism" where he explains why 1886 is not the end. I'll try to translate what he wrote in French:

> *Claude Monet's efforts to integrate Berthe Morisot and Camille Pissarro into the International Exhibition of 1887 and his joy at seeing the entire "primordial group" reconstituted in Georges Petit's galleries. Far from the "bitter quarrels" described by Rewald, the painter shows here a desire to ease the tensions that weighed on the group. These examples alone attest to the sustainability of a movement that does not disappear with the eighth exhibition but takes over new spaces. In this regard, the Sixth International Exhibition of 1887 would have deserved its place in the continuation of Rewald's History, in the same way as the exhibition of the works of Alfred Sisley, Camille Pissarro, Auguste Renoir, Berthe Morisot and James Whistler at Paul Durand-Ruel in 1888.*

I love this quote as well by Schuwer, which shows the complexity of the movement- "Sans jamais se désintégrer, l'impressionnisme se démultiplie dans une constellation d'individualités qui continuent de l'incarner…" In English, this translates to - Without ever disintegrating, Impressionism multiplies in a constellation of individualities, who continue to embody it. Schuwer was referring to painters such as Manet. Monet, Renoir, Sisley, Pissarro, Morisot, and Caillebotte but I feel like, in the same way that the universe continues to expand, this constellation continues to spread as well. The Impressionist philosophies are universal at this point and many artists, such as myself, continue to apply them.



Impression, 2022, Hoi An

Flame II, 2022, Hoi An

But don't you think that Impressionism is defined within a certain time period and very specific rules? Can modern Impressionist works still be considered Impressionism?

This is a layered question. Rules are always used to delineate artistic movements, not because the artists need rules but because the critics and audiences do. If they are to understand what is good, they need to understand what is "bad" and to do so they create a rule. What's funny about these rules though is that they are based on perception. For example, if an animal were to walk across the border between France and Germany, they wouldn't notice any difference. People made up that invisible border and we only perceive it because we know what the "rule" is. It's the same thing with art movements. What is the border that we've created between Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, for example? It's simply the perception of subtle differences between the two styles. We then try to categorize artists within one or the other, yet, the artists themselves often crossed back and forth between both worlds.

Manet is said to be a leader of Impressionism. Yet, he never participated in any of the exhibitions. Cezanne is categorized as a Post Impressionist, but he participated in several of the Impressionist showings. One of the common definitions of Impressionism is that it should be painted en plein air, yet Degas, who was one of the important organizers of the movement, mostly painted in his atelier. You can see how art history is one of those things that can fall under the category of "the more you know, the more you realize you don't know."

So based on all of these ideas, where do you feel like you fit into this movement? You work *en plein air* and love natural settings, like many but not all of the Impressionists. You follow certain compositional techniques but break many others ... what do you think you can show modern audiences that is different than what came before?

I think I would like to bring to modern audiences the concept that echoes of the past are always part of contemporary works. It's important to dig into these layers if you'd like to truly understand the artist's intentions. However, I also firmly believe that art can be viewed in multiple ways. I fell in love with Cezanne only after I learned about him, but the works of other artists struck me from the first moment that I saw them. The level of enjoyment or contemplation you feel as you take in a piece of art is completely individual and is based on your experiences and perceptions as much as the artist's. It's a dialogue. I'm having a conversation that is taking place in the past, the present, and the future at the same time, and each one is equally important. Art is a living thing.

HEAT

Réhahn's exploration of Impressionism has manifested in three primary styles - Heat, Reflections, and Salt Reflections. Each style utilizes a natural occurrence to distort reality and lend a painterly quality to the photos. His heat technique, discovered accidentally during post-harvest rice field burning in Hoi An, involves shooting through intense heat waves and smoke, resulting in images that transcend traditional photographic boundaries. The air's distortion due to rising heat blurs the lines of objects, creating an illusion of texture akin to brushstrokes.

Réhahn's Impressionist photos, borne from the unpredictability of natural elements, have shifted preconceived notions of composition. Unable to control environmental factors, the artist relies on his intimate knowledge of Vietnam's rhythms to anticipate certain events. Each photo becomes a game of chance, an exploration of the fleeting and the uncontrollable, which has its roots in the Impressionist philosophy of painting "en plein air." This style was a challenge that the Impressionists set for themselves, knowing that speed and technique were paramount to the success of their works. As a result, they had to reinvent the way they used their brushes, how they transported their paint, how they captured impressions of objects as quickly as possible without adhering to a realistic goal. This inventiveness and speed is even more important when working with heat distortion due to the fact that the fields are only burned twice a year in April and September; the smoke, ash and heat test the endurance of the photographer; the light is constantly changing; and the wind direction and intensity strongly affect the success of the final photos.

Réhahn has expressed further difficulties with the technique in our conversations. Such as needing to shoot a minimum of 100 photos to get one good photo. The burning only lasts one and a half days, making the pressure to capture the desired image even more intense. He typically spends the entire day outside shooting in the fields, which is sustainable in September; however, in April, it is 38 degrees celsius in the afternoon, even before approaching the flames. This heat increases as he gets closer to the scene, needing to remain a maximum of 1 meter away from the fire to capture the scene through the heat distortion. It is not a photographic technique for those who are unable to withstand intense conditions.

Unlike many fine art photos that use distortion to create a specific style, Réhahn's heat photos don't use any filters or editing effects to create the illusion. They reflect only what was captured in the moment. The following heat photographs illustrate the layered effect of the technique. The images explore the transformative effects of heat and smoke to create texture reminiscent of classic paintings by artists like Van Gogh and Millet.

This departure from a traditional photographic style adds a timeless quality, evoking the aesthetic of antique paintings. In addition, the photographs invite viewers to reflect not only on the visual aesthetics, but also on the cultural and environmental significance captured in this fleeting instant of controlled transformation.

FLAME

2022, Hoi An

In *"Flame,"* the artist captures a woman burning her field to rejuvenate the soil for a forthcoming peanut garden. Flame was the first photo in Réhahn's collection to use heat distortion, and it has become the most well-known example of the technique.

The Composition

The photograph maintains a neutral overall tone, accentuated by deep shadows and the warmth emanating from the flames and the woman's non-la hat. The smoke introduces a moody color palette, contributing to the atmosphere of the image. There is a strong interplay between light and shadow, blurring the boundaries between reality and dream, and the specific time/place of the captured moment. The viewer is left to question the medium used to create the image - whether it was painted, if the appearance of texture is real, *et cetera*.

The Context

Réhahn's personal connection to the Vietnamese landscape and his ability to predict and capture unique moments, such as the controlled burning of fields, add depth to the narrative. The limited timeframe for such occurrences adds a layer of pressure, underscoring the challenges the artist faces.

INTO THE CLOUD

2023, Hoi An

"Into the Cloud" captures a woman fanning smoke in her field, creating an illusion that she is rowing through a veil of clouds. The deep red tone of her clothing stands out vividly against the hazy backdrop, resembling a splash of paint in the atmosphere.

The Composition

The close crop immerses the viewer in the dreamlike quality of the image. It is a compositional technique often found in Japanese block prints, which interestingly were known as ukiyo-e (the floating world). The "floating world" in Japanese art references things that are transitory and ephemeral such as leisure time, beauty, the seasons, and the light. The female subject in "Into the Cloud" is certainly in her own floating world. Lost in her work and, yet, seemingly detached from reality.

The Context

The photograph captures the common practice in Vietnam of burning fields between crops to regenerate the soil. Within the billowing smoke, the farmer seems lifted within clouds, adding an element of surrealism to the scene. The intentional distortion through heat waves softens details and heightens this motion.

ILLUSION

2023, Hoi An

In *"Illusion,"* the photographer captures a scene of a temple in the Hoi An countryside, transforming it into a visual illusion reminiscent of layers of paint applied with a palette knife on a canvas. This photograph marks a significant evolution in the photographer's work, blending elements from his Yellow Period with the artistic nuances of Impressionist photography.

The Composition

The photograph presents a dynamic interplay of colors, evoking both the somber shadows reminiscent of Cezanne and the vibrant bursts of yellow characteristic of Van Gogh's palette. The composition maintains an overall neutral tone, enhanced by the deep shadows and the interplay of warmth emanating from the temple. The incorporation of heat distortion, achieved by shooting through the shimmering waves of heat from a nearby burning field, adds an ethereal quality to the image. The resulting swirls of movement contribute to the illusionary effect, blurring the boundaries between reality and artistic interpretation.

The Context

The image not only showcases the artist's heat techniques but also reflects a deep connection to both the contemporary Vietnamese landscape and art history. The choice to capture the temple amidst the controlled burning of a nearby field adds layers of depth. In *"Illusion,"* the boundaries of reality and artistic interpretation are blurred, provoking questions about the medium used to create the image.

REFLECTION SERIES AND SALT REFLECTIONS

Réhahn's "Memories of Impressionism" collection is defined by the use of the natural world to enhance the works and add texture beyond the two-dimensionality of photographic paper. Shot exclusively in the Vietnamese countryside, far from 19th-century France where Impressionism was born, these photographs transcend geographical and cultural boundaries, revealing universal themes.

There is a through line within each work, yet, even within this stylistic similitude, there are differentiations that separate the works into three distinct series.

In the artist's Heat and Salt Reflections collections, the environment determines the color palette. Heat photos typically utilize warm tonal colors balanced with somber grays and blacks - colors that arise from the post-harvest rice paddies, the fire used to burn the fields, and the depth-creating smoke. In contrast, Salt Reflection photos are a mix of blue with striations of bright white - the colors of sky and salt that lend a certain cool tranquility to the works. The **Reflections collection**, *in contrast, has more freedom within the locations and colors, from lotus ponds with bright pink blossoms to a golden-toned beach to a flooded field with green plants adding texture to a watery world.*

Each series has a distinct canvas, showcasing the artist's adeptness within the timeless theme of the pastoral in Fine Art. In this analysis, I give several examples of the artist's most successful compositions that utilize reflections in different ways.

> *"What fascinates me about reflections is that they are almost invisible if you don't pay attention to them. When I first started photography, I focused only on reality but these transparent twin images were always there, just beyond my perception. Yet, equally important."*

REFLECTIONS

OASIS

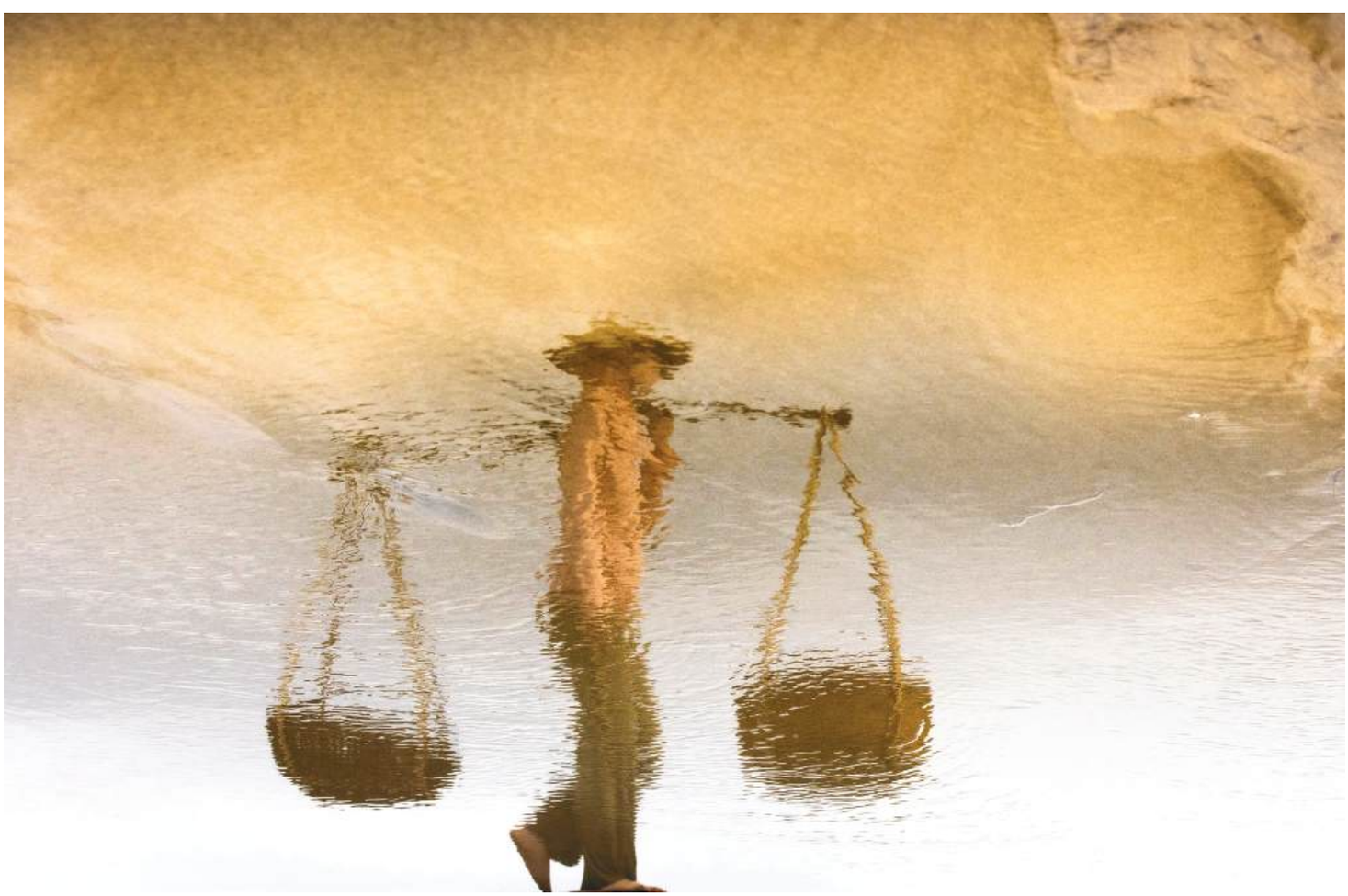
2022, Hoi An

The Composition

The hazy image invites viewers to contemplate the woman as a mirage or memory, with the reflection emphasizing the simplicity and beauty of the scene. The broad washes of color in the work can be traced back to the artist's passion for the use of color in the Japonism movement in Fine Art.

The Context

This photograph was created by shooting a reflection of a woman on wet sand. The soft beige and gray tones of the beach instill a uniform tonality that allows the woman to fade into her surroundings, highlighting a sense of solitude as the viewer focuses on the single figure.



LUMINOUS

2023, Hoi An

The Composition

The photograph transcends the two-dimensional, presenting a dreamlike impression of life. The smudged reflections and luminous brushstrokes create textural complexity, inviting viewers to focus on the interplay of light, color, and texture.

The Context

Luminous was shot in a flooded rice field. The reflections of fragmented clouds and luminous blues and greens pay homage to the Impressionist style while grounding the scene in the contemporary context of Vietnam.

SALT REFLECTIONS

CLOUDKEEPER

2023, Can Gio

The Composition

The interplay of colors and shadows in the salt reflections lifts the scene from two-dimensionality into a textured landscape, showcasing the transformative power of the environment. The sweeping waves of salt across the field add a striated effect, resembling raised layers of paint and contributing to a soft surreal effect.

The Context

In this salt reflection work, a man is sweeping dried salt to harvest it. The effect created by the reflection transforms the salt into what appears to be clouds and the broom into an oar. The distortion from the reflection illustrates the dream-like element that the artist seeks, starting an intentional dialogue with the viewer about the importance of location and context.

CONVERSATION
ABOUT JAPONISM

The intricacies of Japonism—a pivotal movement in art history that melded Japanese aesthetics with European sensibilities during the late 19th century—is not well-known to contemporary audiences. The symbiotic relationship between the East and West, during this time, created a nuanced fusion of cultural influences, which art historians credit with many elements of Impressionism. Within the context of contemporary sensibilities, some people believe that Japonism refers to art by Westerners depicting Japanese people or trying to mimic Japanese art. It is important to note the distinction that the Japonism movement relates to the influence of Japan on stylistic choices such as asymmetrical compositions, the use of negative space, bright colors, and patterns, rather than Japanese art itself.

Réhahn discusses how his "Memories of Impressionism" series utilizes elements from the Japonism movement to shift perspectives, subject matter and the overall spirit of the composition.

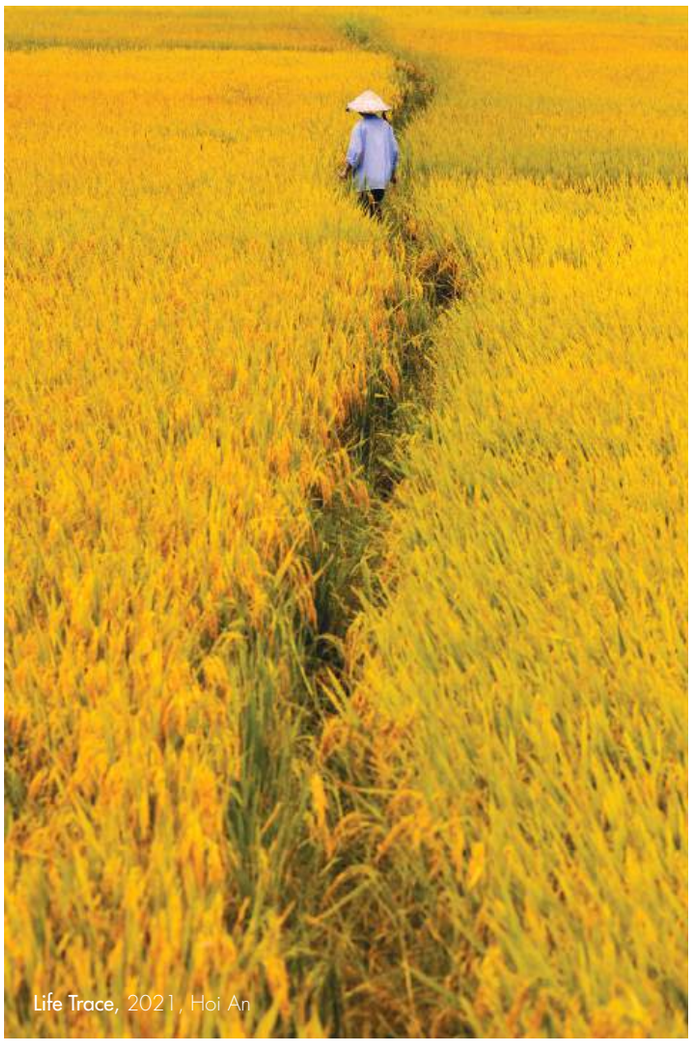
Can you explain what drew you to explore Japonism in your work?

I discovered Japonism while I was reading the correspondence of Van Gogh. He wrote to his brother Theo, in 1888, that he finally can paint like the Japanese. I was intrigued and I decided to do further research. I found a book called "Impressionism and Japonism" by Jean Colin. I was amazed to see the influence Japanese art had on the Impressionists. You can see the influence on Toulouse Lautrec and Degas in their compositions; Cezanne was inspired by Japanese art when he painted his series of the mountain Sainte Victoire in a similar style to the Japanese series of Mount Fuji. Monet's bright colors and his Japanese garden are a clear homage to Japanese art forms. Japonism had a transformative impact on the art world. The integration of Japanese symbolism, spirituality, and motifs into European art during the late 1800s opened up new possibilities for artistic expression, challenging traditional norms. I realized that Japan also left a fingerprint in Vietnam with the Japanese bridge and the fan that many stores still sell here. I decided to create the photos Royal, Carmine and Imperial, to reference the mixed cultural inspiration between Japan and Vietnam.

What exactly is Japonism, and how did it influence European art during the late 1800s?

Japonism refers to the integration of Japanese aesthetics into European art and design. It gained momentum after Japan reopened its borders to international trade in the 1860s, flooding Europe with Japanese prints and crafts. Artists like Monet and Degas were captivated by the vivid colors, unique compositions, and symbolism found in Japanese art. This influence marked a departure from traditional European art, giving birth to movements like Impressionism, which then led to Post-Impressionism.

Tradition IV, 2018, Hoi An



Life Trace, 2021, Hoi An

Flame, 2022, Hoi An

Golden Field, 2020, Hoi An

Could you elaborate on the specific artistic principles of Japonism that captivated European artists and continue to influence contemporary artists?

Japanese prints, particularly Ukiyo-e, played a significant role. The use of simplified compositions, textural patterns, empty space, and unconventional viewpoints stood out to European artists. It challenged the prevailing notions of perspective and composition. Additionally, the focus on tranquility, harmony, and symbolism in Japanese art resonated with the Impressionists, inspiring them to capture the essence of movement rather than strict representation.

You mentioned the rule of thirds and how it was challenged by both Japonism and Impressionism. How did you incorporate this in your own work?

The rule of thirds is a guideline I've consciously chosen to deviate from. In works like *"Life Trace" and "Golden Fields,"* I play with perspective, breaking free from traditional compositional rules. By doing so, I aim to create a dynamic and unconventional visual experience, mirroring the spirit of Japonism and Impressionism.

Your use of cropping in photography echoes the tightly cropped compositions of Japanese prints. How does this technique contribute to the dramatic effect in your images?

Japanese prints often employed tightly cropped compositions to add drama and visual interest. This technique, which gained popularity in the late 1800s, remains essential in contemporary art and photography. In my images, such as *"Flame"* and *"Tradition IV,"* the closely cropped layout intensifies emotion and style, drawing inspiration from the dramatic impact seen in Japonism.

The exploration of flat colors is a common thread between Japonism and Post-Impressionism. How do you use color to create an impact in your work?

The Japanese approach of using large planes of bright tones resonated with European painters in large part because of the emotional ties that we humans have to color. I love how the Post-Impressionists diverged from the Impressionists to deepen their relationship with these more intense color palettes. Many of my photos have bright

The Starry Night, by Vincent van Gogh, 1889

tones as the central focus - a style that I was drawn to long before I began my research into Japonism. However, in *"Day Remnant"*, and several of my newer images, I've decided to take color in a different direction. The smoke and heat distortion mute the colors and blur lines. The colors of the field and flame—yellow, orange, and blue—still come through but as if they were applied with watercolor. As a nod to Post-Impressionism, I always hope the distortion and swirls of smoke will create a textural element that aligns with the surreal effect of Van Gogh's "The Starry Night" but unlike with paint, many things are out of my control.

> *"Japonism wasn't about borrowing superficial aspects for novelty; it was a profound appreciation for the aesthetic principles, symbolism, and craftsmanship intrinsic to Japanese art."*

Day Remnants, 2023, Hoi An

Your work also explores the concept of negative space. How do you use empty space to enhance the impact of your photographs?

Embracing the concept of negative space is integral to Japonism. In works like *"Carmine", "Imperial", and "Royal"*, I use pitch black negative space and asymmetric compositions to create a sense of mystery. This technique allows the subject to breathe, in the hope that the viewer will engage with the image on a deeper level.

Some might view the integration of Japanese aesthetics into European art during the Japonism era as a form of cultural appropriation. How do you perceive this, and what sets it apart from appropriation?

That's an important distinction to make. Cultural appropriation involves taking elements of a culture without understanding or respecting their cultural context, often leading to the misrepresentation or disrespect of that culture. Japonism, on the other hand, was a mutual exchange facilitated by the reopening of Japan to the world.

Can you elaborate?

Japonism emerged as Japan reestablished trade with the West after more than two centuries of isolation. Artists in Europe were genuinely captivated by the artistic and cultural elements coming from Japan. It wasn't about borrowing superficial aspects for novelty; it was a profound appreciation for the aesthetic principles, symbolism, and craftsmanship intrinsic to Japanese art. We should also not forget that the Japanese fell in love with Impressionism, and that the influence of French art made a similar impact in Japan.

How did artists during the Japonism era demonstrate this appreciation in their work?

Artists like Monet, Degas, and others actively studied and adapted principles from Japanese art into their visions. They sought to understand the deeper meaning behind the aesthetics, incorporating them to create a new visual language, which is similar to the way that any language evolves. Whether you speak French, English, German, or Vietnamese, your language now incorporates influences from other languages and cultures. It's the same with the language of art. Elements from other art forms and movements have always

Royal, 2022, Hoi An

Carmine, 2022, Hoi An

Imperial, 2022, Hoi An

Being, 2023, Hoi An

helped to shape what comes next. Van Gogh was one of the biggest fans of Japonism in his work. But there were also large art collectors and museum curators who followed the trend, such as the director of the Louvre and the Goncourt brothers.

How do you hope your audience perceives the cultural exchange represented in your work?

Respecting the cultural context is paramount. In my "Memories of Impressionism" series, I aim to pay homage to the spirit of Impressionism, Japonism, and contemporary photography by embracing all of these principles and aesthetics. It's about creating a dialogue between cultures, art forms, and time periods acknowledging the influence without diluting or misrepresenting the essence. The intent is to celebrate the beauty of exchange rather than using it for novelty.

What do you hope viewers take away from your "Memories of Impressionism" series?

Through "Memories of Impressionism," I aim to transport viewers into a dreamlike space, a "floating world" as it was called in Japan. Japonism has enriched my artistic perspective by breaking down boundaries, much like the transformative impact Japonism had on the art world more than a century ago. I hope viewers experience a sense of connection to the past while appreciating the evolving nature of artistic expression.

Imperial, 2022, Hoi An

CONVERSATION
ABOUT COLLECTIONS

I'm always fascinated by what well-known artists collect. Their work is sought after to become a part of the worlds of other collectors, adorning the walls of private homes or museums.

But what matters to them? What small obsessions might they have? How has the act of turning ephemera into meaningful collections shaped their lives? Often, these items fall outside the artist's own mediums as they seek inspiration from literature, anthropology, old letters, or even vintage matchbook covers. It all depends on what memories are sparked by this assemblage of things. Anyone who knows Réhahn personally knows that his collections span continents and cultures. His infatuation with 19th-century literature and art has filled his personal library, while his collection amassed over the course of his 10-year research project to document and preserve items of ethnic heritage in Vietnam now fills an entire museum - The Precious Heritage Museum in Hoi An. The items from this important cultural collection are well-known and available for public viewing, but few people know about the pieces that he has sought out for his personal collection. Items which speak from the walls and drawers, whispering secrets about their origins and past owners, breathing life back into Victor Hugo and Cezanne, Van Gogh and George Sand … I sat down with him to discuss his favorite acquisitions and the meaning these items have for him.

What is your earliest memory as a collector?

I began collecting vinyl records even before collecting books. At the age of 14, I made my first purchase, an album by Queen. I was an amateur DJ for friend gatherings; a pastime that continued later in nightclubs in Normandy.

Every Sunday, I woke up early to chase treasures at flea markets; called foires à tout in French. I didn't have money, the internet didn't exist, it was the cheapest way to expand my collection.

My book collection started not long after discovering the Dead Poets Society. This movie was really a turning point for me. The idea of "Carpe Diem" resonated deeply in me, as it does for many teenagers. This is when I fell in love with 19th-century literature, especially Alfred de Musset and Victor Hugo's works from the 1830's. I bought modestly priced editions, which only cost me 1 euro at the time.

Do you believe there is something different about the spirits of people who love to hold on to things from the past? What motivates this fascination for you?

I have admiration for many artists, writers, musicians, painters … but not from this century! As Alfred de Musset wrote, "I was born too late in a world too old."

My favorite movie is Midnight in Paris by Woody Allen. I wish I could go back to 1830 and be at the Cenacle with Victor Hugo, Alfred de Musset, Theophile Gautier, Mérimée or at the Café Guerbois in 1874 with Monet, Degas, Renoir, Cezanne…These legends fascinate me. Collecting their books or letters is a way for me to connect with their minds. I love reading their work or visiting their paintings.

What was the first thing that you purchased as a collector that really took you from the realm of interest to truly investing money in a collection?

I acquired the renowned play by Victor Hugo, "Hernani," in its original 1830 edition. The bookseller gave me a good price after seeing how excited I was. He could have sold it for much more but he said he knew I would love it in the way it deserves to be loved. "Not everything is about money," he told me. I will never forget this sentence.

Hernani marked the birth of Romanticism. It was a break with classical literature. I think I liked the fact that Hugo wanted to break the rules of classicism. Same with the Impressionists, four decades later.

I know that you collect first-edition books, paintings, and correspondence. Can you tell me what your prized possessions are in each category?

I have so many, so it's hard to give a "ranking". I have over 40 never-published letters of Alfred de Musset. Those letters give a lot of information about his "stormy" relationship with George Sand, the famous female writer, who later was the muse of Chopin. When I have free time one day, I will try to unravel his writing and copy his words onto my computer. I would love to share it one day.

Another of my favorite books is the original edition of "Cyrano" by Rostand with three letters bound inside - one from Rostand, two from Benoît-Constant Coquelin, the first actor to play Cyrano.

I also really love my collection of original editions of Moliere's plays. Imagine having in your hand the very first edition of "The Misanthrope" (1667) in a perfect red Morocco signed binding!

Recently, I bought the paint palette of Gustave Caillebotte, which was exhibited in Brooklyn and Houston in 1977 for a retrospective of this talented impressionist painter, who was also a friend, and patron of Monet, Degas, and others.

Another curious thing I have is the beard of Victor Hugo. In 1873, he cut his beard and sent it to the woman who had been his mistress for 50 years - Juliette Drouet. She sent him back a letter promising to keep it until she died.

It's utterly unique!

The last thing I purchased was the full manuscript, 64 pages, of the book Gustave Coquiot wrote about Cezanne. It contains some drawings and some alternatives to the published book. Coquiot wrote one of the most important monographs about Cezanne just a few years after his death. I've been collecting for 27 years. I have an unfinished sculpture of Modigliani, and over 10 paintings of Jeanne Baudot, the only student of Renoir. She was the godmother

The paint palette of Gustave Caillebotte

"I was born too late in a world too old."

of his son Jean, and the friend as well of Julie Manet (the daughter of painter Berthe Morisot). I have some letters of Renoir, Degas, Monet… etc. You see, I can't choose just one item! They've all become like old friends to me.

How do you display all of these priceless items?

Every piece is meticulously showcased, adorning the walls, occupying shelves, or finding a place in a bespoke cabinet that I had designed specifically for manuscripts and letters. I dedicate a significant amount of time to my library every day, immersing myself in the presence of these artists. They are a constant source of inspiration for me.

There has been some debate about whether precious pieces of art and literature should be allowed to be purchased by private collectors, or if they should all be destined for museums and archives. What do you think? What is the role of private citizens in preserving these items for future generations?

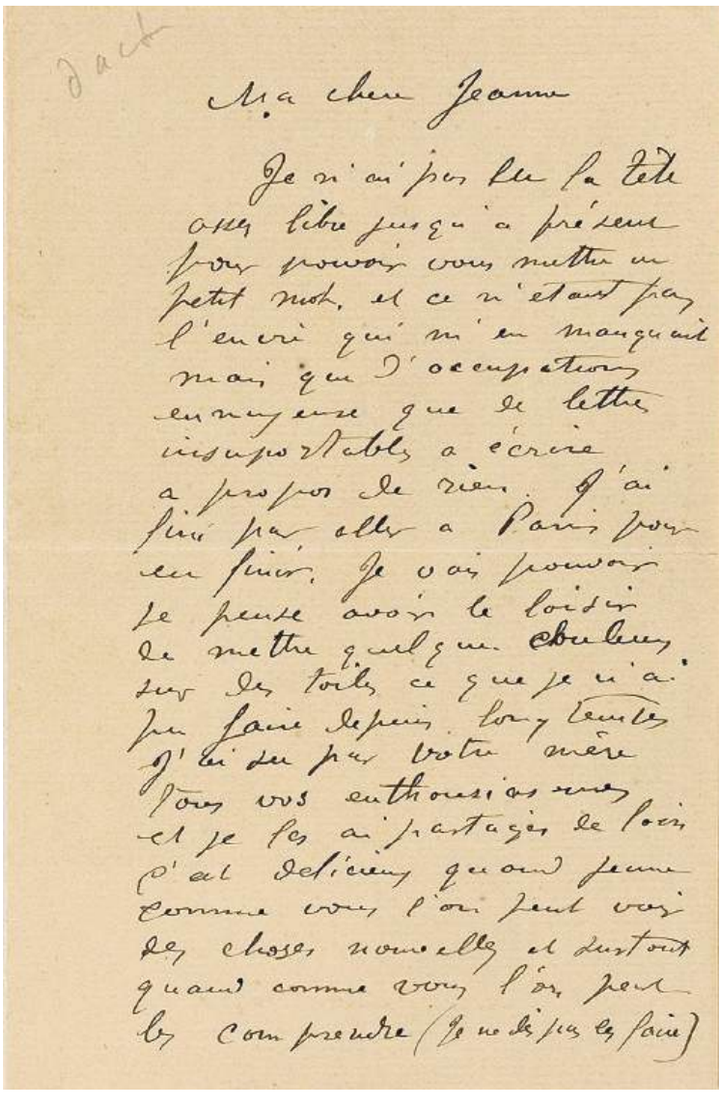
In a perfect world, I think it would be ideal. But the reality is different. Many Impressionist paintings are housed outside of France because academics and critics didn't like them at that time. In the Luxembourg Museum (prior to the existence of the Musée d'Orsay), they almost refused a donation of Gustave Caillebotte in 1894—we're talking about over 50 paintings by Monet, Degas, Cezanne etc. The museum team protested and said they would resign if any of these paintings were displayed. It could have served as a lesson, but history repeated itself with Picasso later on. I wrote my will to make sure my collection will be returned to France.

What do you hope a future collector might love about your work 100 years from now?

I always hope my work will contribute to the heritage of Vietnam and be in national museums in the future. In 100 years, when everything will be digital, modern, and "artificial", I'm sure some generations will still be interested in seeing how Vietnam used to be in the beginning of the 21st-century.

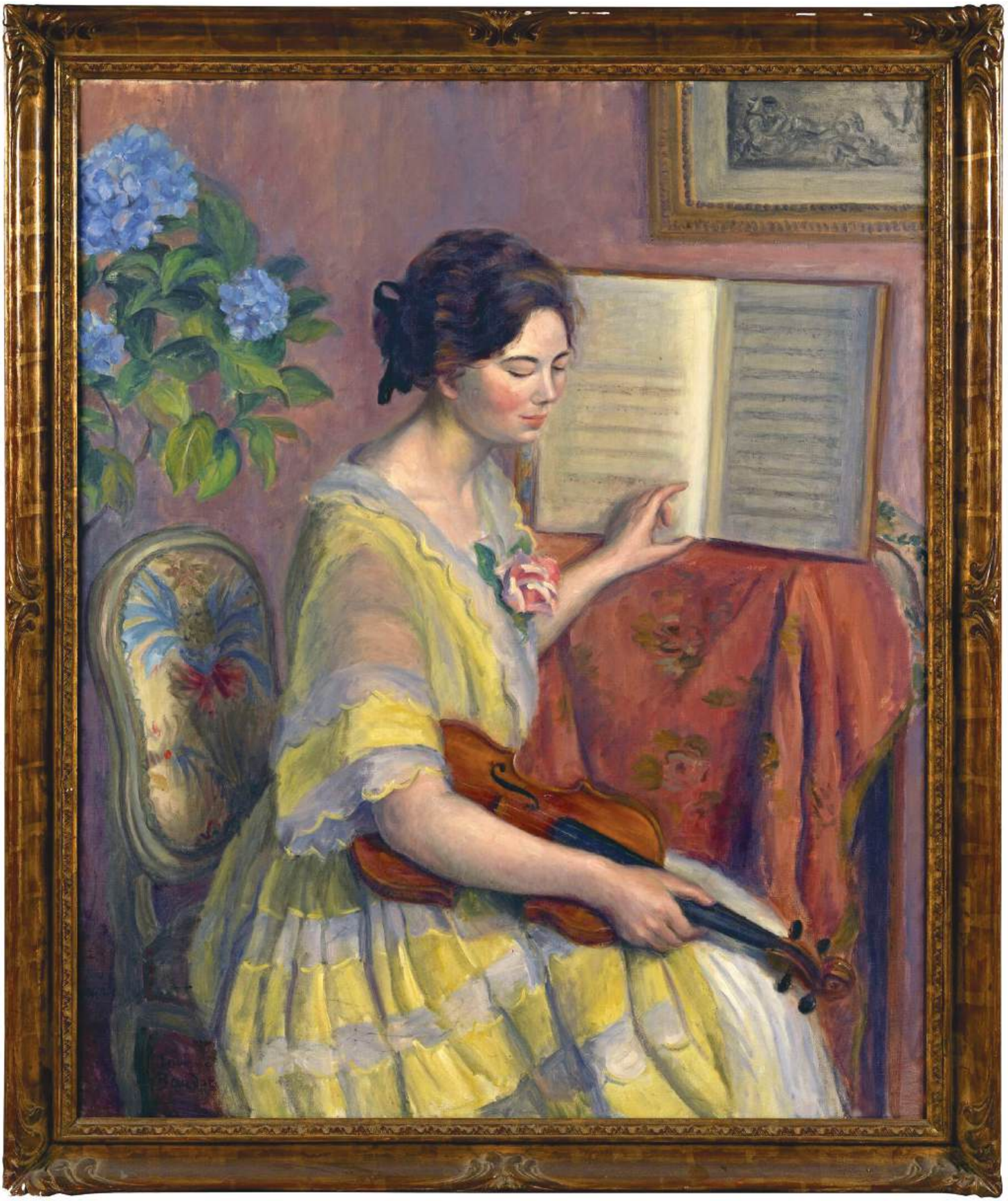
In regards to my Impressionist photography work, who knows, later collectors will maybe chase it in the same way that big collectors are chasing a Van Gogh or a Cezanne. (laughs)

That's the dream!



Letter of Renoir to Jeanne Baudot

The manuscript about Cezanne by Coquiot



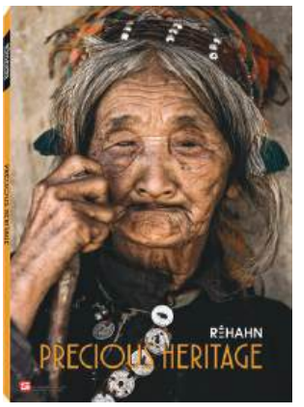
Méditation, Jeanne Baudot (Réhahn's private collection)

VIETNAM, MOSAIC OF CONTRASTS, VOL. I

Coffee table book (28x33cm)

VIETNAM, MOSAIC OF CONTRASTS, VOL. II

Coffee table book (28x33cm)

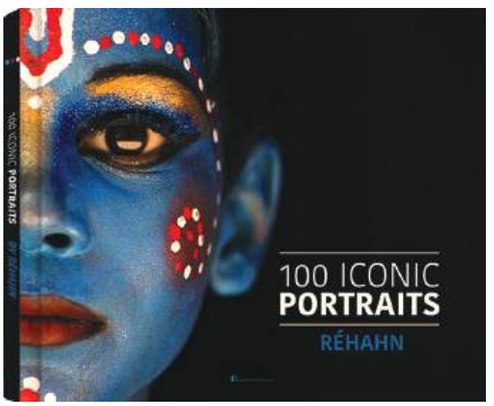


PRECIOUS HERITAGE

Soft back book (15x21cm)

VIETNAM, MOSAIC OF CONTRASTS, VOL. III

Coffee table book (28x33cm)



100 ICONIC PORTRAITS

Coffee table book (29x33cm)

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